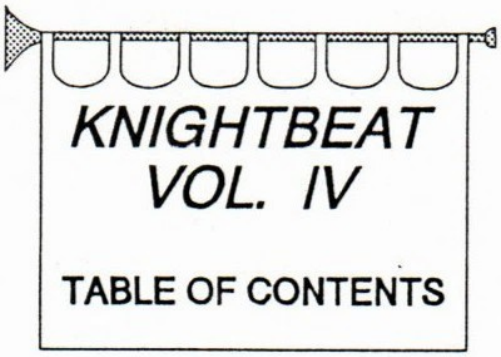
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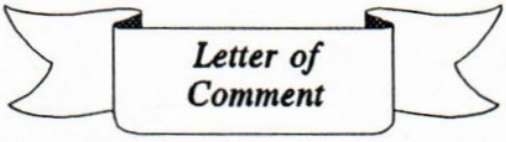


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Well, here we are again, mes aimes. Another cold, dark, lonely night, during which I find that I must seek amusement in HIS absence. The radio is on, tuned to CERK, naturally, and this new host is driving me quietly mad -- HE's taken a job, can you believe it? I suppose I **should** be grateful that I can at least hear his voice, but ... A seductive and alluring caress across the airwaves can be more frustrating than HIS absences! **shudder**

It seems like only yesterday that I found myself so enchanted by these charming little books and their wild tales of The Master and his children. The seasons have changed, and we recently celebrated a delightfully wicked All Hallow's Eve -- He is such an insatiable creature!! But I digress ... and I cannot afford to, because thoughts of HIM may quickly end our discourse before we have had time to really chat.

First, I simply must tell you all how honoured I am that you enjoyed my first foray into print. Your warm welcome has made me feel like part of a family once again. HE is not entirely certain that this literary bent is to HIS liking, but I'm sure he will come 'round in time. If not, well ... c'est la vie, and all that!

HE has at last revealed himself to the errant Knight, as you all know, and life has become ever more interesting. Now, if Nicholas could only be persuaded to be less tiresome and defiant. **sigh** Ahh, well, HE will undoubtedly exact a fitting retribution when HE feels the time is right. Be warned, sweet Nicholas, HE forgets nothing. (There are times, too, I must admit, when that infallible memory is a curse ...)

Hmmmm ... I think it is time to get to the point of this missive, I appear to be side-tracked with astonishing ease this night. To the latest installment of my favourite anthology of the Knight, Volume III.

As with the previous issues, this divine artist, Frank V. Liltz, has rendered an exquisite portrait of Nicholas. (I know the likeness is quite exceptional because HE could not take his eyes off the image when HE happened upon my copy of the book!) If I were the jealous type ... well, we need not get into that, need we?

Inside, much to **my** enjoyment, and HIS somewhat sardonic amusement, I discovered that the editorial staff chose to print my last letter! So, attention-seeker that I am, I am back to make further comment on your fanciful tales.

FIRST BLOOD: I **knew** this Gabrielle Sinclaire bitch would return to haunt my happiness. (HE is devoted to the slut, you know.) She is as mad as HE, but I can fully understand her obsession. It is HIS behaviour which makes me wonder ... Will this eternal quest to reclaim Nicholas ever get us anything but grief? I think not. Gabby appears to agree. Yet HE refuses to listen to any of our pleas! I feel Ms. Sinclaire may learn to regret her passion for The Master.

CASE FILE #13, LISA, FADED MEMORIES: As I told you last time, this lady Pam Jensen is wonderful! Such inspired reminiscences, and beautifully poetic insights. I continue to look forward to more of her writings.

BY VIRTUE OF NECESSITY: This is disturbing, and unsettling. Ms. McBeth is clearly a writer of some talent, and she finds a way to penetrate the indifference so many of our kind exhibit. I felt for Nicholas in this terrible dilemma Janette forced upon him. (Of course, His Royal Nastiness merely laughed it off and wondered what the problem was -- what more are we to expect from HIM though? HE is so incredibly amoral, and so completely selfish -- Yet, I do adore HIM ...) I think you must read this story several times to fully appreciate its dark subtleties and its mood. It is certainly worthy of the extra attention.

NO OTHER WAY: It is immediately apparent that this charming poet, Kathleen Y. Bergeron, is one of Nick's enamoured supporters. She feels for the poor, perhaps misguided?, Natalie, as well. An intriguing tale this is, but I fear The Master was not amused. (This is not a promising sign for a long and productive future, I must confess ...) I am glad that the good doctor and Nicholas appear to have found each other, but **do** guard your backs, children -- HE's watching! No other way, indeed ...

ASSORTED POETICS/FILKS: All quite nice and varied enough to create moods for any occasion. You faithful followers of the Knight are a most creative and perceptive lot, I must say.

A LADY'S PLEDGE: First, I demand to know, who **is** this Geraint Wyn Davies who dares to claim himself an expert of our more intimate encounters? Secondly, dear Doctor Lambert should have kept this small warning in mind when she met His Lordship on that fateful night explored in Ms. Bergeron's remembrance ...

OBSESSIONS: I **did** say that Ms. Sinclaire was headed for disaster, did I not? HE is a thorough and irredeemable bastard, as the unfortunate lady discovered only too well. I almost feel sorry for the tramp. (Note, I did say **almost**, she is still deserving of some of this pain. Though, I **can** understand

her hunger for HIM ...) Vixen is a rather demented creature, and dangerous. I do wish HE'd learn to show some slight compassion for those of us who worship him so ... I see the end nearing, and I can only hope HE will not fall prey to the same weakness that very nearly destroyed him a short time ago -- this need to exert his dominance over Nicholas has caused us all too much anguish, don't you agree?

I believe I hear HIM returning?

Yes, HE's back. The voice on the radio has not been *The Night Crawler*'s for the past while. I wonder what His mood will be tonight? He's been rather unpredictable of late, and I never know what he will want. There have been times when I have thought myself a total fool for continuing to endure HIS abuse. But, HE does have his talents, and they **are** worth the moods he slips into, I assure you!

I see HE is not smiling tonight. The blackness that surrounds HIM is chilling. I fear we must conclude our conversation yet again, my dears. I cannot bear to see HIM brood, and perhaps I can find a way to lighten his spirits! (Think what you will, darlings, I **will** enjoy my task! HE is so incredibly amoral, and so completely selfish -- Yet, I do adore HIM ...)

Until next time,
bonne nuit ...

"Sleepless In Toronto"

RETRIBUTION IS MINE . . .

by

Denysé M. Bridger

Spring 1992: TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA ---

The Raven was alive with the sounds of music and the less intense but equally compelling pulse of countless heartbeats. Life echoed from and permeated each throb of human excitement. For several moments they lingered near the entrance. LaCroix's ghost of a smile reflected amusement as well as indulgence as he watched his lover's head tilt back. Gabrielle Sinclaire's beautiful features were suffused with enjoyment.

"I wonder if I'll ever get used to this?" she whispered as she leaned back against his chest.

LaCroix's arms wrapped around her waist and she shivered when his lips touched her temple in a light kiss. He held her for several seconds longer then she stepped out of the loose embrace. Their communication was silent, as it had been so often in recent months. LaCroix knew that intimate link was the result of their constant companionship, and the lack of other lovers for either of them. To his considerable surprise, he found he was thoroughly enjoying the complex and seductive bond.

Inside, the heavy back-beat of thrumming rock 'n roll and the strobe of multi-coloured lights on the dance floor enhanced the dream-like atmosphere. Gabrielle smiled, basked in the invisible cloak of security in which LaCroix's presence enveloped her. She took a deep breath, touched his mind with the surge of love she experienced through his nearness. His light caress to her hair answered the wordless affirmation of her devotion.

"Where is the owner?"

Gabrielle heard the demand in his tone, emphasised by the hypnotic power of the ancient vampire. She waited for the answer she knew would be immediately given. It proved unnecessary, her head snapped up and LaCroix's hand closed on her shoulder to steady her sudden unease. The stunning, raven-haired owner had turned from the bar and now watched them in combined amazement and wariness. Gabrielle felt the depth of her age, and the dazzling blue eyes, so like LaCroix's, swept over him as he urged her forward.

"Janette," LaCroix bent over her hand and kissed the delicate fingers

with gallant charm.

"What are you doing here, LaCroix?"

The words were spoken in perfect Parisian French, yet Gabrielle understood each syllable. LaCroix had taught her many languages in their brief time together.

"Is that any way to greet me after so long?"

Gabrielle smiled at his mocking tone, and wondered why there should be so much carefully contained rage within this extraordinarily lovely woman.

"You would not be here unless you wanted something," Janette replied in the same flippant manner she'd used to greet him. For the first time, her gaze moved past the tall, silver-haired vampire and her eyes widened in shock when she registered his companion's identity.

"Gabrielle?" she stammered. "But this cannot be."

"I am not who you think I am, Janette," she assured the confused woman.

"But you are," Janette disagreed. She slithered from the bar stool like a graceful feline then walked around LaCroix's lover. "You are most definitely Gabrielle Colby."

"I have not been Gabrielle Colby in almost two hundred years," the auburn-haired vampire stated softly. "Until a short time ago, I was Gabrielle Sinclaire, and I knew nothing of your world."

Janette weighed the words as she continued to appraise the master vampire's lover. She sensed no deception in Gabrielle's manner. If anything, she was oddly in sync to the other woman's mental presence. She didn't stop to analyse the unusual occurrence. Nor did she respond directly to the younger vampire's statement.

"She is as lovely as ever," Janette addressed their master once again as she reseated herself.

"And remarkably as we knew her," LaCroix acquiesced. He felt the flare of annoyance in Gabrielle's mood, knew she resented the subtle dismissal. Still, she'd obviously created the thread of communication he'd requested, otherwise Janette would have questioned her further. Inwardly smiling, LaCroix pulled Gabrielle back against him as he sat on the barstool next to Janette's perch. His legs parted and Gabrielle moved between them and leaned closer to him, her head rested on his shoulder as she watched Janette's coolly amused grin emerge.

"Adoring as always, Gabrielle," she murmured.

"Where is Nicholas?"

Janette's fine eyebrows rose and her mouth pursed into a dainty "oh" as she understood what had brought LaCroix to her after so long an absence.

"I haven't seen him in years," she eventually replied. She gestured for drinks and awaited LaCroix's response to her words.

"You always know where he is, ma chéri." He swallowed a mouthful

of the carefully prepared ruby 'wine' Janette had ordered. LaCroix's eyes locked intently with the lovely brunette's as his lover's fingers curled around the slender stem of her glass. Without thought, his free left hand covered Gabrielle's abdomen and pressed her more tightly to him.

Gabrielle's eyes closed as a ripple of desire flooded her body. She could feel his passion, heightened by the swarm of life around them and the power he knew he now held over The Raven's mistress. He enjoyed his hold on them both, one presently fed the other. Long fingers stroked the soft velvet of her skirt, the light caressing pressure becoming more intent as his touch massaged her pelvis. She wanted to block out the noises of the nightclub and urge him to more intimate exploration. Her left hand slid over the cool leather of his jacket and came to rest at his wrist. Her fingers traced the back of his hand in a lazy caress.

Janette watched the shift of Gabrielle's expression, felt her own stomach tighten with undeniable yearning when the other woman's body trembled with delight. LaCroix's lover was now oblivious to everything except his provocative touch. Janette was mildly surprised by the master vampire's behaviour, then she remembered vividly the insatiable lust these two had always shared. She squirmed on the barstool, the response beyond her control. Again, the sense of being attuned to the other woman's mind drew her inward and kindled stronger longing within her. Unconsciously, Janette ran her tongue over her teeth, the sharp points of her fangs drew blood -- she hadn't felt their emergence.

LaCroix's eyes glowed golden fire when he smiled at Janette and she clutched the top of the bar when his tongue glided over the side of Gabrielle's neck and a low growl of aroused sensuality escaped the captivated woman. The Raven faded around them and Janette's eyes closed in a spasm of shared rapture when LaCroix lowered his mouth to his lover's neck. The wine glass Gabrielle held shattered and sprayed crimson liquid across the bartop. A tiny droplet of the mixture dotted the pale perfection of Janette's cheek. The sharp penetration of LaCroix's fangs passed instantly and euphoria filled Gabrielle's mind and body. Janette felt the wash of their ecstasy engulf her, caress her mind as they made love in this most intimate way -- with a room full of people totally unaware of what was going on.

Seconds later, LaCroix drew back and felt his lover melt against him. His arm encircled her waist and held her as Gabrielle slowly shook off the delirium of his unexpected passion. Her eyes opened and she smiled when she saw her own near-exhausted bliss reflected in Janette's glittering blue eyes. The wet trickle of wine on her limp hand drew her gaze and she raised stained fingers to her lips as she licked at the scarlet liquid.

"Where is Nicholas, Janette?" LaCroix repeated his earlier question, his deep voice rich with erotic satisfaction. He was anxious to leave the club now.

"I don't know," she answered. To her considerable irritation, her voice was a rough imitation of its usual clear tone.

"He'll come to this place, soon, bien-aimé," Gabrielle purred to LaCroix. She pressed herself against him, resisted the urge to turn and bury her fangs in his throat. The ache between her thighs was a near pain, and she knew he sensed it as acutely as she herself felt it.

Janette's brows rose again at the redhead's breathy assertion.

"He has never come into my club."

"He will," Gabrielle assured her.

To Janette's amazement, LaCroix accepted Gabrielle's statement as fact. He leaned closer and his pale fingers traced the smooth contour of Janette's cheek. He brushed away the unnoticed stain of the wine, and smiled.

"You will deliver a message when he arrives, Janette."

She flinched back from him, uncomfortable with the renewed warmth his touch incited. She nodded curtly. "Tell me what you wish me to pass on to Nikola -- **if** he drops by -- then leave my club, LaCroix."

He laughed.

"You were enjoying my company so much a few moments ago," he taunted with purely feigned regret. When she started to stand his hand clamped over her wrist. Notably, the bodyguard who automatically stepped forward at the possible threat to Janette just as quickly backed up again. LaCroix's gaze hadn't shifted from the beautiful lady who stood before him, enraged and expectant.

Glaring at him, Janette continued to wait, and LaCroix reached into his jacket pocket. A moment later he handed her a small envelope.

"I **will** know if you try to protect him, Janette."

Janette cast an angry look at his companion. Gabrielle was the source of LaCroix's eerie insight, she realised with a start. Just as she'd been the source of the guard's sudden retreat. The strange flow of communication between them had ended with LaCroix's unanticipated taking of his lover's blood. His hunger had consumed Gabrielle, focused her thoughts solely on him.

'Sinclaire', Janette thought. She'd heard that name before tonight. Then the memory came back to her. The woman had been a well-known psychic in her mortal life. She had been faintly gifted in her earlier lifetime as Gabrielle Colby. It explained why LaCroix had claimed her so completely again -- she was his vision to the future. Gabrielle was responsible for their presence in Toronto, she'd led LaCroix to Nicholas. The woman was as much a fool now as she'd been two hundred years ago, the lovely vampire decided. Her dedication to LaCroix had cost her two mortal lives, as well as an immortal one -- yet she still adored him. Janette shook off the dark recollections and stared into the pale sapphire of the master vampire's eyes.

"I told you I will give him your message, LaCroix," she hissed with

barely restrained wrath. She allowed her disdainful glare to sweep over Gabrielle, and the words fell from her lips before she could rethink their utterance. "Now take your pet home and fuck her privately!"

Their laughter trailed after the lovely club owner as she stalked back to her office. She was still seething when she felt them leave the Raven.

"Damn you, LaCroix!"

* * *

They said nothing as they left The Raven. Gabrielle was all but twitching with aroused hunger and she could concentrate on nothing but the fiercely compelling need to enjoy her lover. LaCroix's smile was indolent and amused as he watched her -- he knew how badly she wanted him.

They'd walked only a few doors away from the nightclub when Gabrielle turned and yanked him into a darkened alley. She knew no one was near and she drew him further into the pitch blackness. He hadn't uttered a sound, but she knew he was laughing at her as he waited to see what she intended to do. She shoved him back against the solid brick wall, appalled in some distant corner of her mind by the lack of consideration she presently showed him.

LaCroix was startled by the force of her attack. The surprise grew when she leaned into him and her hand slithered across his chest then dipped lower to massage the growing hardness between his thighs. The pressure of her hand grew steadily and he thrust his hips into the demanding caresses. When she began to nuzzle the side of his neck he laughed out loud.

"You're very determined tonight, my pet," he taunted.

"Determined?" she repeated the word with a new inflection, one that implied the concept was absurd. "I want you, LaCroix. And, I don't intend to wait until you decide I can have you."

As if to emphasize her declaration, Gabrielle reached for the buckle of his belt and quickly released the clip. Seconds later her hand worked its way into the open front of his jeans. Her lips covered his and her tongue explored his mouth with the same fierce urgency as her fingers moving over his rigid length.

"I don't think I've ever been fucked in an alley," LaCroix mused when she drew the soft velvet of her skirt up over her hips. She wore almost nothing under the rich garment and he casually snapped the thin strand of elastic that held the sheer lace brief in place. She laughed when he tossed aside the wisp of material and reached for her.

Gabrielle shook her head and smiled, the expression revealed extended fangs and her eyes glowed fire back into his. Still unmindful of her actions, she hauled him away from the wall and pushed him to the ground. LaCroix's

eyebrows rose and anger woke within him, she felt the shift in emotion as she climbed across his thighs. She didn't care.

She pulled at his jeans until she had exposed only what was necessary to fulfil her immediate need, then she unzipped her tight velvet jacket and leaned over him. Full breasts grazed the silk of his shirt and she shivered at the sensation of touching him and being touched by the cool fabric. Her hips moved against him, enjoyed the feel of the smooth length of his arousal pressed to her moist warmth. She moaned softly and rubbed herself harder against him.

LaCroix's hands closed over the enticing roundness of her breasts and he squeezed with enough pressure to elicit a tiny gasp of pain from his lover. She jerked away from him and tore open his shirt. Before he could anticipate her, Gabrielle impaled herself on him and began to ride him with an abandon that actually surprised him. Her features were tense with concentration as she trapped his hands with hers and their fingers entwined. Her back arched and her hips moved harder against him. Again, so swiftly he didn't see the action coming, Gabrielle's head descended and her fangs tore into his chest near his heart. Real pain rippled the length of LaCroix's body.

The shock of her assault thrilled and angered him -- two might play this game of dominance, but it was LaCroix who would always win the contest of wills. Gabrielle had been allowed her moment, he decided with aberrant pleasure. He reversed their positions and trapped her beneath him. LaCroix tugged her head from his chest, ignored her whimper of objection, and yanked hard until the curve of her throat was invitingly exposed. He trapped her hands as he lowered his head to her neck. He bit with no more gentleness than she had and her body convulsed and tightened around him. A hissing growl of fury escaped her and he drove himself deeper into her with brutal force.

"LaCroix ..."

He released her hands and they immediately slid down the length of his back and covered his buttocks. She pulled him harder against her writhing body. Long legs encircled his waist until he pulled back, disentangled her hold and slid his arms under her knees. He leaned forward again and her spine curved to accommodate his shift. The palms of his hands were flat against the chilled asphalt they were oblivious to and her fingernails dug into his wrists as he carelessly fucked her like the whore she'd become this night.

Blood smeared her breasts, his blood, and LaCroix's smile was filled with triumph when her head fell back and she choked back a strangled scream. Her body twisted in his grasp and her shudders pulled him over the edge into his own frenzied release.

Minutes later, he let his arms slip from under her legs and rocked back on his heels as he pulled her up into his embrace.

Gabrielle felt tears stream from her eyes as she nestled into the curve of his neck. Her entire body felt abused but sated in a way she hadn't known

she wanted. If she looked closely at her behaviour, she would be horrified at what she'd done to him. Instead, she whispered her love and he soothed the shudders that still wracked her.

They each felt the approach of the young mortals long before they were reached. Gabrielle eased away from her lover, laughed softly as their bodies separated at last. The sticky stream of their pleasure glistened against the pale ivory of her thighs and she ran a finger through the moisture before she slipped the wet tip between her lips and smiled wickedly at him.

LaCroix took her hand and sucked her finger deep into his mouth -- he felt the hunger stir to new life inside his lover. She was still aroused and her mood unpredictable. He was enjoying tremendously this new side of her nature. She withdrew and looked upward, past his shoulder. He knew there were two people behind him.

"Isn't this special?"

Gabrielle smiled at the insolent tone. The alley that had previously been in complete darkness was now dimly lit by the increased glow of the streetlight near the entrance. She could see the pair as clearly as if the sun shone on them. At the moment, perhaps more alluring, was the realization that they could see her, and LaCroix.

She tossed back her hair and stood. LaCroix rose as well and she saw him pulling his jeans over his hips and closing them. She slid her skirt down from her waist and partially zipped her jacket. The entire time she held the transfixed stare of the boy who watched every tiny action she made. She could feel the heat of his lust even with several feet between them.

"You must like it rough, baby," he laughed. "Does the sight of blood turn you on?"

"Yes," she breathed, eyes alive with macabre humour.

"Maybe we should cut up your boyfriend and see how much you get off on that," the second boy sneered.

She didn't acknowledge the words, her eyes remained locked with the first of the two youths. She deliberately eased the jacket zipper down again.

LaCroix's eyebrow rose. He knew she'd never let the boy touch her, but he'd never before seen her incite anyone in quite this manner. She was a deliciously amoral creature tonight, he thought with satisfaction.

"You want me, don't you?" she purred quietly. "You want to fuck me in front of him, don't you?"

The first boy had already taken a step closer to her. His eyes were firmly fixed on the blood stained beauty of her naked breasts. He wanted desperately to close his mouth over the erect points that tipped the softly rounded curves. The ache in his groin became painful when her slender fingers teased him by flicking over her nipples and cupping her breasts as she fondled herself.

LaCroix laughed whole-heartedly when the boy made a lunge for her.

Gabrielle caught the young man's wrist and spun him into the wall. LaCroix heard the distinct crack of bones as she jerked her victim's head back and buried fangs hungrily into his neck as she pressed herself to the hapless boy's back.

The youth's companion never made it to the mouth of the alley. LaCroix seized him, and minutes later two bodies littered the ground as the vampires smiled at each other.

"I've never seen you like this, pet," LaCroix whispered as she stepped over the boy's body and into his arms.

Gabrielle all but collapsed against her lover and she tried to control the blood lust that continued to dominate her mood. She hadn't killed since the first night she'd awakened to her new life. She had sworn it would never happen again. Tonight, still consumed by the madness of LaCroix's possession, she hadn't wanted to stop until there was nothing left to take from the boy. Even now, her body craved her master's touch.

"We have to do something with them," she eventually said.

LaCroix laughed, the sound cold and mocking.

"**We** already have, Gabrielle," he murmured as he kissed her bared shoulder. He continued upward until his mouth closed over hers and she twisted fully into his embrace. Her soft body moulded to his and she sighed quietly as she returned the oral caress with the first sign of her usual gentleness.

"I think this time we will enjoy ourselves at home," LaCroix promised when he drew back and stared into her wide grey eyes. He scooped her into his arms and flew.

The lovers were so absorbed in each other they failed to notice the figure who watched from the mouth of the alley.

* * *

Janette shuddered, still acutely attuned to the mood of LaCroix and his lover. She had felt their lust, the subtle shifts of their hungers as they fought and fucked each other a short distance from her nightclub. She had almost screamed herself when LaCroix had torn into Gabrielle's tender flesh. Her throat still ached with that recalled sensation, and she absently caressed the slender column of her neck. She almost felt the scars that she'd spotted on Gabrielle's throat, knew personally what kind of dark passion LaCroix would have felt when he left such permanent marks. Passion, or rage, a small voice corrected within her mind. Either way, it would have been agony. Janette would never admit, especially to herself, that she felt a touch of envy for the other woman. With real effort, she shook off the threat of too potent memories. She had not been LaCroix's consort for many years, and she **did** prefer to keep it that way.

Gabrielle and her master had attacked and killed two mortals before they'd finally left the area. As much as she would have preferred to ignore the ancient vampire's visit, Janette refused to have the police so near her club. She rose with a hiss of annoyance and headed into the smoke-filled main room of The Raven. She called one of her bodyguards to her side and within minutes he was enroute to the alley.

Janette fumed as she watched the activity that surrounded her. The last thing she expected to find herself doing tonight was cleaning up after LaCroix and his equally mad lover. Gabrielle had always been a shadow of LaCroix's insanity, and it seemed two hundred years had done nothing toward improving her ability to refuse the master vampire **any** pleasure he wished to indulge.

Damn them both to hell! Janette raged silently.

* * *

Gabrielle paced the empty halls of the huge estate that LaCroix had recently bought on the edge of the city. She loved the old house, it reminded her of the mansion that had been her family home in Victoria. She'd wondered if that was the reason he had chosen the place -- it would be very much like him to show a kindness when she least expected it, then treat her with less consideration than he'd give a stray cat.

Their move to Toronto was causing her more pain than she would have imagined possible. He was a man obsessed, and she was too afraid of losing him to leave while she had the chance. Bitterness rose within her. Leave LaCroix? She could no more leave him than she could deny him anything he asked from her. Even this -- this insane need to reclaim the one child he would never allow to be free of him -- the one child who, paradoxically, would **never** accept LaCroix as master of his destiny. Because of Nicholas, they'd fought again tonight. And LaCroix had left her furious with fear as well as anger. He was taking too many chances and she was growing more and more afraid for him. He laughed at all her cautions.

Buying the radio station had been the first indication of his plan to stay in the city. When he'd brought her to the estate, she knew there would be no turning back. He was going to die here, and she had no way of stopping that eventuality.

"Where are you?" she whispered to the air as she stopped near a window and stared outward. He'd killed tonight, and it hadn't been in hunger or lust. Yet, something in his mood touched her with undeniable excitement. His pleasure reached across whatever distance presently separated them, promised her his passion once he returned. She shuddered, suddenly chilled beyond death.

"I'm touched, Gabrielle," LaCroix's mocking voice was a breath of icy

air as he swept into the room. "You waited up for me." He laughed in perverse enjoyment of his warped humour.

He's mad, she thought as she whirled to look into the brilliant blue gems of his eyes. I can't help him.

"I'm in the mood for a celebration," LaCroix continued. He took her hand and dragged her behind him as he went into the Library.

"What are we celebrating?" she asked from her perch on the edge of the desk that was the largest piece of furniture in the room. "Your return to the blood hunt?"

Some of the amusement left LaCroix's handsome features, his eyes glittered dangerously.

"Don't **ever** presume to judge me, pet."

The warning was unmistakable. She surprised him by not looking away from the rage he knew she felt striking out at her.

"It was not judgement, merely curiosity," she replied with a smile that told him she knew neither of them believed her words. Surprisingly, LaCroix allowed the observation to pass unnoted.

"You were not at the studio earlier," she eventually commented when he continued to linger at the bar. His back was to her now, she couldn't see what held his attention. She gasped audibly a few seconds later when he turned and raised his glass in a mock toast. She had her answer. Gabrielle crossed the room in a blur. LaCroix laughed as she lifted the goblet from his hand and examined it with sincere interest.

"This is ancient," she whispered in awe. A shudder of power and reverence rippled her entire body as she integrated her awareness to the artifact held between her shaking hands. "Mayan. From Altin Canal," she finished as she stared up at him, grey eyes huge with the flood of knowledge that filtered into her mind. "You stole this from a Museum." It wasn't even remotely an accusation, simply a statement of fact.

LaCroix nodded absently and watched her as she caressed the Jade Cup and drew its history from the smooth surface and the ingrained memories of hundreds of years. He could feel the force of the tremors that shook her small frame.

"Nicholas wanted this, many years ago. You prevented his finding it." Again, no accusation, only a need to understand textured the sing-song cadence of her voice. "How many did you kill to stop the dig?"

"As many as I needed to," he replied softly.

"He'll know it was you," she warned quietly. Then the Cup's power drew her inward; shared with her the myriad of images that it had been witness to during the long decades before its burial. Blood scent filled her nostrils and hunger gnawed and rumbled deep inside her. She felt the strength of the priest who held the goblet aloft, then drained the ruby elixir. Darkness descended and

she froze, trapped in a void that was infinite, inescapable. She reached outward, groped for the light that was her darkness and her destruction.

* * *

LaCroix caught her when she would have fallen and held her to him as he sank into the comfort of a massive armchair. She was quivering and gasping, yet he would not attempt to break the link that held her trapped in the pages of history. He needed to know what lay there, it was why he'd given her the jade artifact.

* * *

Gabrielle cried out as the sun seared her eyes with blinding, unforgiving intensity. She clutched the cup, begged for release. It was granted, the taste of blood came a second time, the hunger, appeased and subdued, abated quickly. New perceptions rose. The sound of a heartbeat, weak and slow at first, grew steadily. The soft thump gained momentum, with it came the renewed pulse of blood coursing through veins, breath filling lungs with a sweetness that was sheer joy to experience. She clung to the vestiges of a mortal life she hadn't missed until this moment, held the sensations near.

* * *

LaCroix gradually shook her from the near hysterical sobs that had taken hold of her shortly after they'd sat. Her eyes remained vacant and unfocused, but he refused to allow her further time to be consumed by the cup's past. He would never acknowledge the tiny flicker of fear that prompted his consideration. Grey eyes were dazed and filmed with tears of blood when she was finally able to see him clearly.

"He believes this will give him back his mortality?" This time it was a question. The images were frightening and disjointed enough that she didn't fully comprehend what they all meant. She knew immediately that LaCroix understood what she had seen. He smiled and tilted her head up to meet his kiss.

"What Nicholas believes is of little consequence to me, pet," he murmured a minute later.

"Is he right, LaCroix? Will possession of this cup lead him to the light?" She shivered as an anomalous chill gave her the truth. She waited for LaCroix's answer in spite of that unwelcome cognizance.

LaCroix took the Jade goblet from her hands and turned it to the soft lamplight. The artificial glow danced off the fangs that extended from the grinning death's-head. He smiled unconsciously. There was so much Nicholas

didn't know, so many things he would never know. LaCroix held the secrets of millennia within his mind, and one of the most carefully guarded was the one his knight coveted so dearly.

"It is one of a pair," Gabrielle mused as she began to sort through the complexity of images. "He needs them both."

LaCroix laughed softly and set the goblet on the low table that was next to the chair they shared. Long fingers raked through the heavy waves of coppery hair that spilled onto his shoulder as she looked up at him. His free hand encircled the slim column of her neck, sensitive fingertips brushed over the small scars repeatedly as her eyes softened in response to the evocative touch.

"Do you really wish to discuss Nicholas and his foolish quest?" LaCroix questioned, deliberately directing her focus away from the queries he had no intention of answering.

"You are avoiding me, bien-aimé," she purred in a breathy tone.

"Yes, I am," he agreed with a satisfied smirk.

Gabrielle stared deeply into the sapphire beauty of his eyes, felt a shuddering thrill of longing when blue slowly mutated into golden fire. The lust she felt in him weakened other barriers, and for a brief moment she glimpsed the true scope of his knowledge. Before she could do more than understand the vastness of his age, excruciating pain erupted inside her. She arched upward, her entire body recoiled in agony as she tried to escape his silent retribution. LaCroix's fingers knotted in her hair and she screamed when his fangs descended, ruthlessly tore into her throat.

"Je regrette, mon amour ..." The apology was choked, pulled from her by fear and panic. He'd attacked her like this once before, and she had no desire to repeat the experience. "Please, LaCroix!" It was a gurgling hiss of entreaty.

LaCroix heard the terror in her mind, coupled with pain that unexpectedly found itself twinned within him. He hadn't intended to hurt her. The protective defense was as much a survival instinct as the thirst for blood. He forced himself to the gentleness he truly felt for the woman in his arms, and he withdrew slightly. His tongue caressed the opened wounds and his hands moved to calm the fright-induced tension in her body.

Gabrielle quivered in his embrace, very slowly felt pain recede and pleasure wake. LaCroix's fingers unlaced in her hair and the release of his hold brought her lips into contact with his. His kiss was sensuous and gentle, coaxing her trust to resurface as the caress grew more lingering and erotic. She gradually opened her mouth fully to his tongue and returned the probe eagerly for several minutes. When LaCroix finally pulled out of the kiss and smiled down into her eyes, she snuggled closer to him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I adore you," she whispered into his ear, amazed in some distant corner of her mind at the absolute purity of the emotion. Gabrielle only now

understood herself what this man meant to her -- he was more than life or death -- LaCroix was the soul she had been born without.

"I know."

She laughed at the arrogance, enjoyed his confidence. She had no interest in making him doubt her loyalty. If anything, she delighted in his self-assurance. LaCroix was everything to her, and she wanted him to understand it as he did few other things about her.

"Will you make love to me, LaCroix?"

He was actually startled by the soft question. Gabrielle rarely asked for him, more and more often recently, she took him in much the way he'd grown accustomed to taking her -- selfishly and without regard for emotional entanglements.

"I have no wish to fuck you tonight, Maître," she confessed with a wistful smile when she heard the whisper of his thought.

"What is it you **do** want, my pet?"

"Your heart," she murmured, the admission a shaky sigh of air between them. "Your love, though I know better than to expect that gift." It cost her, and the pain showed in her face.

"You have both, Gabrielle," LaCroix told her for the first time. The shock in her features was quickly replaced by a happiness so unabashed and total that the ancient vampire felt a momentary flicker of humility. Her disbelief was also eloquently etched in the huge grey gaze, beneath it was the desperate need to cling to his words. She had wanted this simply thing from him since the first night he'd claimed her.

"Shall I prove it to you, pet?" he teased gently. Before she could answer, he rose and carried her from the library.

LaCroix's lovemaking was as seductive and skillful as it was gentle and giving. Gabrielle knew him as few others had over the centuries, tonight she was permitted to claim him as her lover in a way fewer still had ever experienced.

"You belong to none but me, Gabrielle," LaCroix whispered hours later to her sleeping form. A tiny murmur of sound escaped her and she pressed closer to him as he idly kissed the top of her head where it nestled beneath his chin.

* * *

Gabrielle watched him from the roof, shielded by the immense power

she drew from the city, and LaCroix. She'd seen the reports of the theft, and curiosity had enticed her to risk discovery. She could feel the desires that coiled around the couple below her, encompassed them in a spell that woke astonishingly different fears in their hearts. She shuddered when the vampire woke within him and threatened to strike.

"Nicholas ..."

Gabrielle clenched her teeth and forced her mind to clear. Hatred rose and touched her consciousness in the instant before she withdrew into shadow and reinforced the protective shield she'd woven around her presence. The skylight was still open, as it had been since Knight had made his entrance to the Museum. Gabrielle felt the rush of his flight, saw the agony that twisted his features into unmistakable self-loathing.

Nicholas flew into the darkened sky, and Gabrielle leaned back against the stone wall. She shivered uncontrollably as she tried to order her chaotic thoughts. Her heart contracted within her as she accepted the impact of Nick's presence. She had never gotten this close to the knight before, on some level she had been afraid to go near Nicholas. LaCroix had fed that fear, and now she understood why. She had loved Nicholas! The master vampire had been very careful not to tell her that.

Centuries old memories began to torment her, and she wept.

* * *

"Where have you been?"

Gabrielle whirled, startled much more than she should have been. LaCroix's presence as not easily missed, especially by her.

"Why? Did you miss me?" The sarcasm was misplaced, and she braced herself for his anger when the warmth that had been in his indigo gaze turned swiftly to ice.

LaCroix stepped forward and his hand rose to touch her chin. He tilted her head up so that he could look clearly at her. She felt the familiarity of an ancient memory come with the gesture. Nick's face filled her thoughts, smiling and teasing, LaCroix shared the image within his own mind.

"You've seen Nicholas."

She pulled back, walked to the window of the spacious living room. She lifted her arms and placed her palms against the window-frame, waited for the words she needed. They refused to accommodate her need.

"How much do you remember?"

There was mild boredom in his velvety voice. She gritted her teeth against the flood of rage that threatened her composure.

"He was my friend," she eventually offered. "I loved him." She fully accepted the knowledge as simple truth when he didn't refute the statement. She leaned into the glass, felt the chill of it touch her with a cold that went far

deeper than her skin. "Why didn't you tell me?" She didn't want to ask. She couldn't **not** ask.

"Tell you what?" LaCroix snarled with clear contempt. "That you never had the courage to be his whore, but were content to worship him with sickening reverence? I would have preferred that you shared our bed with him than watch you simpering before him like a love-sick puppy." He crossed the room and reached for her, then shook her with the full force of his fury. It rose from the past, and despite two hundred years, LaCroix, as he had so often before, wanted to kill her for the perceived betrayal.

"I never loved him that way, LaCroix," she spat back. "I wanted no other man's touch. Even then I was that much a fool over you."

"And now?" he challenged. "Is Nicholas still the knight fair, my pet? Do you still believe him noble and worthy of your eternal honour? Will you take now what you were afraid of two centuries ago, Gabrielle?" His voice grew colder with each word, until she flinched visibly at the hardness in his tone.

"I don't even know him, LaCroix!" It wasn't an answer, and she knew he wouldn't fail to notice the oversight. She wondered herself why she couldn't answer, because her heart, like her body, would never belong to anyone but LaCroix.

"Who was he with?"

Gabrielle eased away from his hold and turned her back to him. She buried the images that his question created in her mind. Alyce Hunter's face, the kisses she and Nick had shared, the love that Gabrielle sensed between them. All the threats to Nick's happiness were hidden in an instant, and she flinched as LaCroix's hand knotted in her hair and he yanked her back against him.

"Tell me!"

It was a hiss of enraged power, and Gabrielle sobbed as the impact of his wrath battered her mind. She trembled with pain and exhaustion, but withstood the mental assault. She had few defences when LaCroix wanted something from her, but he had not yet found a way to penetrate the psychic shielding that was her only freedom from total servitude to him. She also understood that it was this last vestige of independence which kept him with her. LaCroix only coveted what could not be had by sheer want. If he had been able to control her absolutely, he would have tired of her as quickly as he'd claimed her.

"If you pursue this, LaCroix, you'll die here. Nicholas **will** be the one who is your death." It was a conversation they'd had many times during the past few months.

LaCroix released her, his touch eerily gentle and exacting. He turned her back to face him.

"Tell me what you see?"

"I have," she replied sadly. "You choose not to listen."

"Where?"

She sighed, reached for the vision that haunted every waking moment of her life with him. Tears filled her eyes, and she shook as she let the agony engulf her again. She concentrated on the room that surrounded LaCroix, the flames seared her inner eye, and she tore herself from the images.

"I don't recognise the place, bien-aimé," she whispered. "Only the fire and the pain. Your pain. Mine ... " she finished in a hushed sob. "I **can't** lose you."

"Nor I you," LaCroix told her, his expression unexpectedly tender.

Gabrielle felt a twinge of bitterness and she brushed back a lock of auburn hair as she met his mesmerising eyes.

"I'm nothing to you, LaCroix. I do know that. I wish I didn't because then perhaps I could tell myself that you need me, and that's why I allow myself to be laughed at and used."

"You're wrong." He didn't give her time to reply. He caught her gaze with his, held the curious and pain-filled eyes as he extended his hands to her, palms upward. When she slipped her fingers into his grasp, he tugged her forward until her arms went around his waist naturally.

"Please don't leave me."

LaCroix tightened his hold on her, closed his eyes as the wash of her love flooded into his mind through the intimate bond of their shared thoughts. He would never willingly leave her, he realised with sudden insight -- but, he also sensed that the time was nearing when he would be forced to send her away from him. They were becoming too dependent on each other, the bonds too intricate and destructive. If he didn't push her out of his life, they'd eventually destroy each other. The abusiveness between them was already becoming more and more insidious. To his surprise, LaCroix discovered he didn't want to hurt her. Nor did he want to feel her love turn to hate.

* * *

I can't believe this has happened, Gabrielle thought bitterly. The streets were all but deserted, and no fear whispered to her mind. It had been so long since she had felt this way, this horrible sense of aloneness. Loneliness was a familiar feeling, she conceded, but he rarely cut her out of his life entirely. Her heart was breaking as she walked, blind to the two men who watched her and followed. They had been trailing her for several days, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Flame red hair glowed as she passed beneath the streetlight and sought refuge in the empty park. The iron gates were locked. She twisted the steel bolt as carelessly as she would crumple paper, the result was the same. She

kicked open the obstacle and continued her walk. She didn't bother to swing the barred gate back into place.

His voice, so beautiful and enticing teased her memory. She had fallen under the spell of his voice from the moment he had first uttered her name. She adored him. And she frequently hated him. He felt the same way about her. They understood each other in ways no others could. Their passion was as complex and dark as the very nature of their existence.

The small pool of water that dominated the centre of the lovely mid-town park drew her to its peaceful banks. She dropped into a casual seat on the soft moss and drew her knees under her chin. His face filled her vision and she felt the wetness of cold, bloody tears streak her cheeks.

It was always Nicholas they fought about. Once again it had been the golden-haired knight that placed them on opposite sides of an impassable chasm. She finally accepted that she had always loved Nicholas, but in a vastly different way than she loved the master he had abandoned. Yet, the pale, terrifyingly powerful ancient would not accept her love when it was tainted by loyalty to his most prized child.

He asked her repeatedly to tell him what it would take to make Nick accept him again. That there was nothing to offer LaCroix made little difference to his insistence that she had an answer she would not share with him. The truth was, Gabrielle did have one piece of information she would not give her lover. Alyce Hunter. The museum curator was in love with Nicholas, and she was starting to figure out what he truly was. That made her dangerous to more than Nick.

* * *

"She's beautiful," Paul murmured as his gaze wandered over the lovely woman who sat at the water's edge.

"She's a monster," Craig snapped. "Have you forgotten what that bitch did to Kirk?"

"You don't even know it was her," the first man snapped, his nerves taut and ragged.

"I saw them," Craig assured his friend. "Her and that sadistic son-of-a-bitch she was fucking."

"Then how come you got away when no one else did?"

"Because they were so God-damn busy screwing each other they didn't notice anyone else!"

"She's gonna kill us too if you're right about her."

"No, she's not. We've been watching, remember? She's weak now, no 'food', and the fight with him."

"I don't wanna do this, man," Paul whispered as he watched her head rise slightly. The coppery mane shone with the colour of rich, fire-warmed

coals.

"Why? Because you see a pretty face, or a body you'd like to have in your bed?" Craig taunted. "She's a killer, Paul. She tore my kid brother's throat out, and it's gonna cost her."

"What if he comes looking for her?"

"He won't."

"I got a bad feeling about this, Craig."

"Imagine how she's gonna feel," the other man leered. Hatred distorted normally attractive features, and he swung his backpack off his shoulder to place it on the ground. A few moments later, he stood and looked at his nervous companion.

"Since you like looking at her, why not go over and have a chat?" he suggested softly.

"What?"

"You heard me," Craig said. "Distract her."

"That's not fair, man," Paul shook his head.

Craig grabbed a fistful of Paul's shirt and yanked the younger man closer to him. When their faces were only inches apart, he hissed from between clenched teeth, "Was it fair what she did to Kirk? He was your best friend, Paul. Why don't you try remembering that instead of plotting to screw the bitch who killed him?"

Paul stared at him for several silent moments. He knew Craig had gone on this vampire hunt as a way to assuage his guilt -- he'd stayed back when Kirk and Glenn went into the alley. He hadn't raised a hand to help them because of his fear. It didn't seem to matter to him that he couldn't have done anything to help his kid brother. Paul had stopped trying to reason with him -- he'd run out of words that never made a difference. When Craig released him, Paul walked away.

* * *

Gabrielle shivered when she felt the approach of the young man. She sensed the anxiety in his mood and turned to look at him as he neared. He was tall and slender, dark brown hair was shaggy and fell over his forehead and into his eyes. He was dressed completely in pale blue denim, and the well-worn running shoes were greyed and scuffed. He had dark sad eyes, and she knew he was wary of her, though the reason was not so readily apparent.

"Mind if I sit?"

She shook her head and turned her gaze back to the still waters that glittered with the reflection of the starlit sky above them.

"It's not exactly safe to be out this late," Paul told her.

"Then why are you out?"

He laughed, the sound brittle and agitated.

"Safe for a pretty lady like you," he amended. "Something bad might happen to you."

"Nothing worse than things which have already happened," she smiled. Several seconds of silence passed before she discerned the other presence. A thread of panic woke inside her. She could feel death in the man's mind -- her death.

When she started to stand, Paul grabbed her arm and hauled her back to the ground. He quickly pinned her to the soft bank, his body sprawled over hers as she attempted to push him aside. She was genuinely startled when she didn't have the strength to dislodge him.

"She can't be what you said she is, Craig," Paul pleaded when his friend stepped into view. "She can't even push me off her."

"Maybe she doesn't want to, Paul," Craig offered. "Maybe she wants you to fuck her while she feeds."

Gabrielle felt real panic emerge. They knew what she was. That was why there was the predominant sense of doom within Paul's eyes. She squirmed with more effort and bit back a cry of pain when Craig's booted foot slammed into her side. Her back arched, and her mind reached for her lover.

'LaCroix! They are going to destroy me.'

* * *

LaCroix paced the CERK studio, his mood dark and brooding as he recalled the argument he'd had with Gabrielle that evening. She could be so damn infuriating and defiant in her loyalty to Nicholas. She hadn't remembered the knight clearly until their arrival in Toronto. The proximity had begun to awaken the memory of their friendship. The friendship that had cost her LaCroix's wrath and desertion two hundred years earlier. Then she'd foolishly sought out the detective, and the lifetime they'd shared had crystallised within her mind. Her allegiance was undeniably to LaCroix, but she now intractably refused to help him destroy Nicholas.

'The Night Crawler' spoke to his audience without conscious thought of what he said, the words were automatic, required no real concentration. As he again flooded the airwaves with the sounds of heavy metal music, he heard the frightened voice within his mind.

'LaCroix! They are going to destroy me.'

Time hung suspended for several eternal seconds. Rage lit a thrill of icy death in his veins, and he headed out of the radio station. He paid no heed to the startled employees that cleared out of his path and cast furtive glances at his retreating form.

* * *

"You're fools!" Gabrielle snarled as she twisted against the metal cuffs that held her to the ground. It hadn't taken the two mortals long to drive steel spikes into the earth and bind her to the hooks as one would anchor a tent. Her legs were spread and her arms pulled above her head. She was trapped securely, and knew herself to be too weak to tear free of the restraints.

Craig stepped over her, his feet planted firmly on either side of her hips. In his hand he held a long ash stake. He leaned down to meet her enraged gaze.

"The kid you killed a few nights ago was my brother," he informed her. "You and your vampire pal didn't know there was someone else near that alley, did you?"

Gabrielle's stomach churned with loathing. She still hadn't come to terms with the murder she'd committed, and the hatred that gleamed in Craig's eyes reminded her too clearly of the savage attack that had taken his brother's life. She'd been consumed by a madness that only LaCroix shared, and she had felt nothing but the need to sate her desires with her lover that night. They'd both killed in the alley.

"You can't seriously believe in vampires?" she retorted weakly.

"Not until I saw you, and what was left of Kirk when you were through with him."

"I didn't touch your brother," she lied.

"Yeah, like you didn't fuck that asshole in front of us," Craig raged. "We watched you," he said as he placed the jagged point of the stake between her breasts. "You gave quite a performance."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and screamed as she awaited the strike that would end her existence. She had only one regret, she would not see LaCroix before she died.

* * *

A second scream split the night air as the silver-haired vampire swooped down on the two men who held his lover captive. Paul's shriek echoed weirdly when LaCroix's real target became aware of the vise-like hand that closed on his throat.

The master vampire stepped back, dragged his prey from the terrified woman on the ground. Before Craig could do more than yelp his terror, LaCroix's fangs tore into his neck and absorbed the lifeblood from the young man. He tossed the drained body aside and caught Paul as the kid backed up and turned to run.

LaCroix snapped the boy's neck with a growl of fury and resisted the urge to rend the kid's head from his body. He dropped the broken figure like a child discards a damaged toy. As the blood lust receded, his eyes cleared and his fangs retracted.

* * *

Gabrielle stared up at him when he stepped into view. He stood over her in much the same way Craig had minutes earlier, but the smile in LaCroix's indigo eyes was speculative, indulgent, and vastly more dangerous for that reason. She had no way of knowing what a provocative picture she presented to her master.

"It would appear that you are not safe when out this late, my pet."

"I'm surprised you care," she whispered, unable to conceal the pain that tore at her heart.

"Of course you aren't," LaCroix purred as he dropped to his knees and leaned over her. Long, pale fingers slipped open the buttons of her blouse and he pushed aside the material to expose flawless ivory skin to the chill of the night air.

"LaCroix, please." The seductive mood was deceptive, she could feel the darker desire that held him rapt to her every tiny movement. He was enjoying his ability to incite fear within her as well as the undeniable thrill of passion that woke at the mere sight of him. The intuition was sudden, and terrifying -- he was contemplating rape, just for the amusement it would offer him, and she was helpless to stop him. Helpless even to offer sincere objection once his hands were upon her and his hunger became her own desperate need for satiation. She tugged at the bindings that still held her, and a stronger shudder of panic seized her. "Don't do this to me!"

"Do what?" he taunted. She was at his mercy, and he found he thoroughly enjoyed that circumstance. He lowered his mouth to one full breast and sucked the rigid tip as his tongue stroked and caressed. His hands roamed freely over her lithe form, and her body tensed beneath him as she tried to pull away from his bewitching touch.

"If you want me ..." The words died in a soft sob. "Not like this. Please?" She was pleading, and she didn't care. She also knew her entreaties would fall on deaf ears -- her despair would feed his lust, inspire him to demand her surrender.

LaCroix withdrew and stared down into her smoky eyes. The sincere fear he read in her face sparked macabre pleasure and he smiled. The expression made her stomach lurch, he felt the wild rush of terror touch his mind. After several moments of silence, he bent forward again and caught her mouth in a hungry kiss as he settled over her twisting body. She tried again to pull away from him.

"You're usually much more cooperative, pet," he murmured as he nuzzled her neck. His hands slid the length of her body, tugged her skirt upward over smooth thighs.

"You usually make love to me, not rape me!" she cried softly. She felt

defeated, abandoned in a way he would never understand.

"It's only rape if you truly object," LaCroix pointed out. He moved a hand between her thighs and long fingers slid deep into her slick warmth. "Your body betrays your words," he laughed as his mouth again covered one taut nipple and he bit softly. His fangs gently pierced tender skin and the tang of her blood created an intense tremor of need in him. He eased away from her.

LaCroix rose to his knees and held her tear-filled eyes with his mesmerising stare as he opened the buckle of his belt. He pushed his jeans down over slender hips and reached for the silky brief she wore. The soft rip of the material made her eyes close and her body trembled as she waited for him.

"No, LaCroix ..."

He ignored the choked plea and again covered her body with his.

"Look at me, Gabrielle," he demanded, his rich voice hypnotic with power. She resisted the order and he grabbed a handful of thick auburn hair then yanked her head back. Grey eyes flew open and he licked away the streaks of scarlet that stained her cheeks.

"Tell me how much you love me, pet."

She shook her head, denial repeated in the set of her jaw. She could feel him pressed against her, her body ached for his, but she would not give him this -- she refused to tell him she wanted his assault. His love she would have killed for, his lust she enjoyed and revelled in -- she would never willingly accept his abuse of her.

"Gabrielle ... " His voice was a breathy moan of desire close to her ear. He smiled at the powerful shiver it created within her. "Prier, ma petite amie ... ma bien-aimé ... "

She cried. Tears filled her vision, made it crimson as the sunsets she remembered so vividly. The endearments were a trap, the only word that echoed in her mind and told her how little she truly meant to him was the one he repeated again and again ... He wanted her to beg for him.

"I hate you, LaCroix."

He slid into her, the motion a seductive, sensual shift of his body against hers. She shuddered, fought the exquisite agony of passion and completion his possession always meant to her. She knew she would lose the battle, that LaCroix's lovemaking would consume her rage and her humiliation. She strained against the bonds that held her at his mercy, heedless of the pain that needled up her arms and legs. Anything was preferable to the heat that was building inside her, the excitement that was making her quiver in his embrace.

Again, his compelling voice demanded her capitulation. His hands held her hips as he thrust into her with inhuman force, each driving movement taking him closer to the edge of his own control. His tongue glided over the curve of her neck, felt the roughness of the scars he'd marred her with months earlier.

He smiled as he prepared to fill those marks again, to tear open Gabrielle's throat so he could appease his insatiable hunger for her.

Gabrielle twisted against him and bit into her lip as she tried to repress the ecstasy of his domination. She knew her body was going to offer him the betrayal of her objections. Seconds later she choked on the scream of pleasure that filled her when he held her firmly and buried his full length into her as his fangs found the exposed softness of her throat.

LaCroix smiled inwardly as he felt her hips respond to his grasp. She arched upward, eagerly accepted him as spasms of enraptured fulfillment tortured her body. His name, the thousand words of love she used to tell him what he meant to her, all flooded into his mind, caressed him as he drank from her heart's well. He closed his eyes, allowed himself the dizzying release his body craved as he gorged on her blood, and her love.

A long while later, after he'd straightened his clothing, LaCroix freed her hands and lifted her into his arms. He felt the shaking that continued to wrack her as she clung to him. Seconds later, her ankles were free and he eased her to her feet. Instantly, she jerked away from him and stumbled. He caught her, held her pressed to his chest. Her resistance slowly melted in the face of his strength. When he spoke again, it was not to offer any comment about what he'd just done to her.

"How did they come to know what you are, pet?"

For several seconds she gaped at him, stunned into silence. He waited, mild irritation the only emotion in his eyes.

"They saw us!" she snapped softly. She ran her hands through the tangle of her hair and met his narrowed eyes. "The other night, in the alley. They watched. Or, **he** watched," she corrected with a shudder when she glanced at Craig. "The boy I killed was his brother."

LaCroix nodded and remained silent. When sobs began to create visible tremors within her he once again gathered her into his arms. The sun would rise soon. It was time to go home, he hadn't saved her from destruction to lose her to the sunrise. Gabrielle was **his**, her Destiny was in his hands -- only LaCroix had the power of life and death over this child. Certainly not mortal boys with delusions of god-hood.

It was almost time to confront Nicholas, and LaCroix needed Gabrielle at his side when the time came for their meeting.

"We have to go now, pet," he told her minutes later.

Gabrielle eased out of his embrace, turned her back to him and flew. She knew it was an empty gesture, but for a moment, it offered her a brief illusory taste of freedom.

* * *

Anger and undeniable fear forced their way into Gabrielle's mind as she neared the meat packing plant. She'd followed Alyce Hunter most of the night, and had grown increasingly worried by the knowledge she sensed in the woman. Gabrielle also knew that the two men she loved now faced each other in the shadowy plant. LaCroix's presence was a bright, dazzling light within her mind, and Nicholas glowed with a softer warmth that made her heart ache.

Rage and betrayal wormed past the pain Gabrielle felt, and she knew it was their emotion which held her paralysed. The depth of the passions that burned within the two vampires was overwhelming. They loved and hated each other with an intensity that was terrifying.

"Damn it, Dr. Hunter!" Gabrielle hissed in an undertone. She saw the woman slip into the building and she glanced warily at the soft blush of the coming sunrise as it tinted the sky with rapidly growing light. The red-haired vampire ignored the instinctive caution to leave and went into the structure. She immediately spotted Alyce -- and froze when LaCroix's tall form suddenly flew to the museum curator's side. Gabrielle swallowed the plea that sprang to her lips and waited.

As she'd expected, Nicholas allowed the Jade Cup to fall to the cement floor. He prevented Alyce's death and drove her from the plant with a harsh order. Gabrielle knew she was about to witness her lover's destruction and agony brought her to her knees. LaCroix would kill her himself if she tried to interfere. Not that it mattered, she thought brokenly, she had no strength left to fight his obsessive desire for Nick.

Pain erupted like a flare of pure sunlight inside her. She fell to the floor, writhed in an anguish that was both physical and born of loss. She would never be sure if the unbearable tide of emotion was hers alone, or if she shared the wave with Nicholas. LaCroix's fury and agony poured into her, and she was unable to move when Knight flew from the plant.

Minutes that were an eternity passed before she heard the soft command in her head. She crawled to the edge of the staging and peered down to where LaCroix was impaled on a metal rack. The hint of a smile curved his lips and happiness suffused her. She was at his side in an instant.

"LaCroix!" Gabrielle's voice was urgent as she eased him free of the metal spikes. He was weak, but still very much alive. The first rays of the sun were filtering through the grimy windows. There wouldn't be time to get him back to the estate. She chose the darkest place available, one of the walk-in freezers. A quick punch to the control panel knocked out the temperature gauge, and she cleared the enclosure in seconds. They would be safe here until nightfall.

She settled onto the floor and gently placed LaCroix's pale head in her lap. Shaking fingers brushed over the silvery hair, and she cursed Nicholas a thousand times throughout the endless hours as she waited for the sun to set.

* * *

Once the sun had set, Gabrielle had taken LaCroix back to their home. She'd fed him through her own veins, and her vigil had become a steady litany of enraged threats to Nick and pleas to LaCroix. She was going quietly mad at his side.

She stared down at LaCroix's still features. The vision came again, unwanted and horrifying in its crystalline clarity. His face blurred, and the images unfolded against her will ...

LaCroix lying in death ... beyond her reach ... his beautiful face a masque of burnt ruin ... his mind a void that reflected back nothing but pain ... his passion dormant ... beyond her reach ...

"No!" It was a cry of denial, wrenched from her by sheer agony. She would not lose him. If she had to face Nicholas herself, she would not lose LaCroix.

Another sob of regret burst from her heart and she clasped LaCroix's limp hand in hers as she tried to escape the pain that was engulfing her and dragging her into a bottomless abyss of nothingness. She loved Nicholas too. She remembered the things that he'd taught her in another lifetime, the times he'd protected her from LaCroix's rage, the times he'd been the only one who understood her fears and her limitless devotion to the master vampire. Nick had been the only honest man in Gabrielle Colby's world. As LaCroix had been the only passion ...

"Gabby ... "

She shuddered when she heard the soft pain-roughened gasp of sound. Her gaze flew to his and waited as the sapphire eyes slowly focused on her.

"I'm right here, mon bien-aimé," she whispered as she stroked a tender touch across his forehead. He sighed and slipped back into a gentler sleep. Gabrielle's hand glided across his bare chest, her fingers covered the healing wound there, and she bent to kiss him.

'Stay ...'

She heard the reluctant word inside her head and smiled as she settled next to him to whisper her love and reassurance to his chaotic thoughts.

* * *

"Back so soon, Gabrielle?"

The redhead turned abruptly at the taunting tone, and her smile grew chillier than it had been when she spoke to the bartender at The Raven.

"Yours is the only club in town that supplies the vintage I'm looking for, Janette."

"And where is LaCroix tonight?" Janette wondered as she searched the

crowd for the silver-haired vampire.

"He is ... " Gabrielle hesitated a second. When Janette's sharp look speared hers, she shrugged. "He's had an ... " Again there was the briefest of pauses, "... 'accident', but I expect he will be fine in a few days."

Janette's blue eyes narrowed dangerously.

"He will have another 'accident', chéri, if the two of you ever again leave behind your garbage for me to attend to! Is that clear, Gabrielle?"

The other woman laughed softly and nodded. "An unfortunate oversight, Janette." The laughter darkened, a subtle shadow of LaCroix's macabre humour. "But I was preoccupied, and you know how capricious LaCroix can sometimes be."

When she would have left, Janette stopped her with a firm hand placed on Gabrielle's arm. The auburn haired vampire waited as she turned back to the mistress of The Raven.

"Why have you become LaCroix's slave again?"

"Slave?" Gabrielle repeated, openly amused by the query. "I would choose another word, Janette."

"And which one would you choose, Gabrielle?" Janette snapped quietly. "I was there. For almost seventy-five years I watched you entertain and adore him, while he laughed at your devotion. He hasn't changed. Have you?"

"I told you once before, Janette," she answered in a hiss. "I am **not** Gabrielle Colby!"

"You were born belonging to him," Janette whispered, though her tone had become devoid of anything other than regret.

"I love him, Janette. As I once loved you, and Nicholas."

Startled, Janette shook her head, the sadness in her beautiful eyes was poignant.

"You may have loved us once, Gabrielle. But it is LaCroix who will dictate the terms of your life, and your association with us. He won't allow you to care again. Particularly for Nikola."

"You're wrong, Janette. I'll find a way to make him accept my choices."

Janette shook her head.

"Then you are more a fool in this lifetime than you were when we found you at that dreadful Inn nearly three centuries ago."

It was a dismissal. Gabrielle watched, torn and hurting as Janette spun on her heel and stalked back into the writhing maze of bodies that twisted and swayed on the strobe-lit dance floor.

* * *

LaCroix healed quickly and with his regained strength came a new

determination to destroy Nicholas. Gabrielle was furious.

"Hasn't the past week taught you anything, LaCroix?"

"Yes," he smiled and reached for her. She tried to evade him and LaCroix's grip tightened painfully on her wrist as he yanked her down to the bed she'd just left. She tensed when he pressed her back against the mattress and his hands slid open the silk kimono she wore. "I've rediscovered the advantages of spending days in bed," he teased.

"I'd keep you here forever if I thought I could make you forget about Nicholas," Gabrielle whispered through the sudden threat of tears. His sensual laughter made the scarlet drops spill onto her cheeks as she closed her eyes and drew his head down to meet her kiss. LaCroix's touch was unexpectedly gentle and she felt new pain rise within her when she realised he was, in his way, offering her his gratitude for all she'd done for him during the past week. Her arms tightened around his neck and she pressed her body closer to his, asked for him without words.

LaCroix's tongue leisurely stroked her neck, explored the hollow at the base of her throat. She sighed and tilted her head back as she waited for his fangs to strike. He withdrew enough to look down into her wide grey gaze, smiled at the glow of love that touched him.

"You are beautiful, my pet," he murmured softly.

"As are you," she replied in a shaken whisper. "You are everything to me, LaCroix."

As it always did, the sense of panic rose with the thought that she might lose him. He felt it and shook his head.

"You will be with me forever, Gabby," he reassured in a low, intent tone.

"Why do you call me Gabby now?" she wondered with genuine confusion. "You have never called me that before."

LaCroix laughed quietly. "You have never permitted anyone to address you so casually -- only those who've loved you as you do them."

She stared at him. 'Only those who've loved you ...' She trembled against him, chilled to the core of her being. She wanted to ask what his words meant, fear that they wouldn't be what she needed kept her silent. She clung tighter to him. "Make love to me."

LaCroix's fangs found soft yielding flesh, Gabrielle cried his name and his body claimed her as no other ever would.

* * *

Gabrielle stormed the confines of the library and snarled her fury to the empty room. Impotent rage enveloped her and threatened to send her into the night after him.

"Damn you to hell, LaCroix!!" she hissed. He'd made love to her as

he rarely had before, with a gentleness and giving that should have been in itself a premonition. When he'd lulled her into a blissful state of happiness, he'd left to confront Nicholas. Her pleas, her wrath, her warnings ... all had gone unanswered as he dressed and prepared to leave.

He calmly, indifferently, ordered her **not** to follow him.

There had been enough cold threat in that directive to still her impulse to do precisely what he'd forbidden. Another fear ran deeper, and that one froze her heart within her. She slumped into a chair and stared at the blackened pit of the fireplace. It reflected back the emptiness of her lost soul. Her mind drifted, opened to the madness of the city of Toronto, and she felt the rush of psychic energy infuse itself into her consciousness. She searched the profusion of images, and felt the searing, pale brilliance that was LaCroix. A red haze flushed the diamond-sharp light, and Gabrielle knew he had just fed. His voice whispered inside her head ...

'I believe he got what was coming to him.'

Fire.

She shuddered as the flames began to build swiftly on the heels of rising terror. She recognised the place, she'd seen him die in this room, over and over.

Nicholas.

Fangs gleamed and Nick's eyes were alive with a hatred so intense, Gabrielle flinched. A second later she screamed, her hands clutched her face and she closed her eyes in futile rejection.

'That hurt!'

"No ..." she moaned in agonised denial. "**NO ...**"

LaCroix's destruction had begun.

* * *

It took several minutes for Gabrielle to pull herself out of the mental link that was rapidly destroying her with LaCroix. She shook off the despair that threatened to paralyse her totally, only then noticing that she'd fallen to the floor. She climbed to her feet and fled, the beacon of her lover's pain like a lure to her own demise. Still, without LaCroix, what would it matter if she died too.

The night air offered a cool respite to the psychic fire that scorched her mind and body as she flew to the other side of the city. Nick's loft, she knew instinctively where LaCroix would have confronted his errant child. For the second time in minutes the wash of scarlet blood blinded her -- LaCroix had killed again. She could feel the madness, the lust that drove him, and the triumph with which his act filled him. His voice, still eerily seductive, taunted Nicholas, and Gabrielle shivered in greater fear. Knight's rage was a force

beyond LaCroix's arrogant understanding. In that heartbeat's space of time she knew what was about to happen.

She faltered in flight, recoiling against an agony she would never have believed herself capable of surviving. His pain reached out to her, encompassed her spirit and dragged it into the abyss of anguish that defined his suddenly flickering being. She fell. For endless seconds Gabrielle plummeted to the earth in a graceful spiral toward ultimate destruction. She barely managed to jerk herself free of the fall when the ground rose to fill her vision.

Gabrielle buried the panic, knew only that somehow LaCroix had found a way past what was being done to him. His salvation had been hers. She trembled as she regained the sky above Toronto's streets. Seconds later, she spotted the blazing building and resisted the desire to turn away. Only the essence of LaCroix's power, emanating boldly from the inferno of the warehouse, lured her into the flames.

They didn't see her enter through the broken window in the much the same fashion as her lover had before her. She glimpsed two figures, a lovely brown-haired woman, and the unmistakable figure of Nicholas. The vampire was injured, his pain was a dull undercurrent to the agony that lingered within the air. Gabrielle dismissed them as the door to the lift shut with a grind of objecting gears.

"LaCroix!" It felt like a scream inside her head, in reality it was little more than a sob. The rising tongues of fire nipped at her clothes as she stood motionless for several seconds. She knew if she didn't move, didn't leave, she'd die here before she ever knew if LaCroix was indeed dead. She sensed him, yet she could not see him.

A whimper of sound drew her attention and she leapt toward the cry. She stopped abruptly when she stared down into the dazed and fluttering eyes of Alyce Hunter. The other woman gazed back at Gabrielle, confusion, fright, and anger radiated from her. Gabrielle knew as she bent to force Alyce to meet her eyes that she was seeing the birth of LaCroix's newest child. She pushed past the furious emotions that stirred to life inside her.

"Damn you, LaCroix!" she hissed. She looked around, still searched for him. She could feel him. He was not dead. He was no longer in the loft either.

The heat was unbearable. She paused long enough to sort through the scents that permeated the room. Paints, cleaners, blood, charred human flesh, all the aromas that would later tell her what had happened. She sensed no trace of LaCroix in the carnage. Alyce tried to stand and fell at Gabrielle's feet.

For a minute, the red-haired vampire hesitated. With a sigh, Gabrielle reached for the woman and picked her up. She derided herself for the weakness, but refused to let the scientist die -- she might yet prove to be LaCroix's final creation. That thought did not bear thinking, and Gabrielle refused to accept it as she flew from the crumbling building with Alyce Hunter

in her arms.

* * *

"Drink, Alyce!" Gabrielle snapped in barely contained annoyance. She was in no mood to coddle the newly made vampire, but she also felt responsible for the woman now. The archeologist had done little but cry since they'd reached the estate two nights earlier. Gabrielle remembered vividly the fear of her first nights. She'd been luckier than Alyce, LaCroix had been with her, had protected and sheltered her from the overwhelming array of perceptions that had teased her sanity.

Gabrielle crossed the room and sat next to the woman. She again handed her the wine bottle and frowned when Alyce shrank away from it. Irritated beyond measure, Gabrielle grabbed the woman and held her head firmly so that their eyes locked. Very softly, she began to speak to Alyce, soothe her fear and her confusion as their minds merged. Gabrielle found the memories of Nicholas, and Alyce's love for him; she buried the feelings deep inside the scientist's mind. The images of LaCroix were coloured with loathing and terror; that emotion stung the lovely psychic, but she again worked her will into Alyce's being. Hatred was quickly replaced with loyalty, fear with obedience. Alyce **would** serve LaCroix when he was found -- if not, Gabrielle would destroy her.

Gabrielle gradually lulled the other woman into a peaceful calm, then tore open the vein in her own wrist. When the blood spilled freely, she raised her wrist to Alyce's mouth and forced her to drink. She continued the ritualistic process for several hours, and created a bond that would insure Dr. Hunter's submission and allegiance. Gabrielle hated the time that it required, wished fervently that she had been able to spend that precious interlude searching for her lover. But, if LaCroix lived, as Gabrielle suspected, they would need help to remain hidden while he healed. Alyce Hunter would be her eyes when she couldn't leave the master vampire.

* * *

"What is it you want me to do?"

Gabrielle smiled at the scientist. "Simply watch them. I want to know what Nicholas is doing. He thinks LaCroix dead, and I intend to keep it that way."

"LaCroix is dead," Alyce whispered, and despite her fear of the redhead's anger, she allowed the disdain she felt to texture the soft utterance. Gabrielle's laughter was not the response she had anticipated.

"LaCroix is beyond definition, dear Alyce. He is not ordinary even

among our kind. He is very much alive."

Alyce shuddered. "How could you know such a thing?"

"Because he is my soul, and as long as I exist, LaCroix does. We are bound as few others, and you would do well not to question me where he is concerned." It was a guarded, careful warning -- the type LaCroix might have made. Gabrielle **was** LaCroix's will now.

"What is that?" Alyce gestured to the newspaper in Gabrielle's hands.

"Nick has donated his Jade Cup to the museum, in honour of your memory." Gabrielle's smile was darkly amused.

"What?"

"Go there, and watch him. But," her voice dropped to a tone of dire threat, "do **not** allow him to sense your presence. Remain distant."

"Where will you be?"

This time the archeologist's tone was tainted with fright. She hadn't been out alone since her waking, she was already shaking at the thought of being without Gabrielle's support.

"I won't be far, Alyce," Gabrielle soothed. She went to the other woman and brushed a gentle caress across Alyce's forehead. "I am going to find LaCroix tonight, but I will know if you need me. There's nothing to be afraid of, I promise."

Alyce was not reassured, but she had already learned not to push Gabrielle's tolerance beyond its very short limit.

* * *

The estate was empty after Alyce had been dispatched. Gabrielle absorbed the silence around her, reached into it and embraced the power that lingered in the air. This house, unlike the Sheraton mansion in Victoria, belonged to LaCroix -- it was his personality etched into the very aura of the rooms. Her back arched in a spasm of pleasure as she caught the remnants of their abundant passions, she deliberately rejected that alluring memory and stretched her mental probe deeper. A weak tremor of response slowly answered her search.

Gabrielle sent her thoughts deeper into the darkness that she felt surrounding the whisper that called to her. It was LaCroix, of that she had no doubt. No other would be able to sense her this acutely, and answer her.

"Where are you, my love?" she murmured to the silence. Her hands curled into fists and she focused her concentration more intently. As before, there was a brush against her consciousness that told her he had heard her.

The faint light faded, and panic surged into her mind. Had he died? No! She would not even allow the thought to take root in her head -- her heart would not permit the possibility that LaCroix would no longer be the centre of

her existence.

"Where would you go?" she questioned the empty room. "You are not here, where else would you feel safe?" She made her mind clear, drew in the threads of his presence, and suddenly his thoughts seemed to become her own. She knew. It made sense, and was so obvious she berated herself for not seeing it immediately.

* * *

The catacombes that ran beneath the radio station were a maze of shadows and echoing drafts of sound from the city far above them. Gabrielle walked the labyrinth, her glowing gold eyes filtering the darkness and permitting her unimpeded vision. Her fingernails dug into her palms as she paused in her search and leaned against the cool stone wall. She was desperately tired and knew she'd been foolish not to feed before she'd left the estate.

"Help me, bien-aimé," she cried softly. "You must help me."

The silence was deafening, and terrifying.

Gabrielle pushed herself away from the support of the stone and continued further into the tunnels. She didn't question how or why they came to be there, she was far too grateful for their existence.

It seemed hours passed, in actuality it was less than one. She reached the lowest level and saw the sealed panel of old wood at the bottom of the uneven flight of stairs. Blood stained the handle of the door, it was still sticky despite the nights that had passed since he'd sought shelter here. Of course, there was almost no air in this section of the maze, another safety feature of the hidden retreat.

Gabrielle glided down the stairs and touched the scarlet smear with a shaking hand. She raised the finger to her mouth and tasted the blood. Relief left her gasping for a moment as she gathered her courage then tore the door open. She collapsed on the cold floor and a low sob of happiness escaped her.

* * *

Alyce stared at the redhead's back, unaware that Gabrielle read every thought she had with regard to the man who lay motionless on the huge bed. Alyce wanted to hate him, but something told her that would create tremendous danger for her. Instead, she watched through narrowed eyes and wondered what Gabrielle would demand of her next. She did not have long to wait for her answer.

"Call The Raven," Gabrielle ordered softly. "Tell Janette it is Gabrielle, and I need a small store from her wine cellar. I'll go for it myself, tomorrow night."

Alyce heard the dismissal and was more than happy to escape the

claustrophobic confines of the bedroom and the hideous presence of the body in the bed.

* * *

Gabrielle sat on the edge of the mattress and her stomach twisted within her as she allowed her eyes to wander over him. LaCroix's pale beauty was charred and ghastly now, his face a grotesque masque of burnt flesh. The deepest burn was on the right side and it remained raw, tiny drops of blood slowly slid from the wound and would not be stopped. His chest, bare and exposed to her gaze was another monstrous display of the aftermath of the violence he'd been subjected to. She'd fed him fresh blood, hoped it would do something to heal the gaping hole in his body. It seemed to have no effect at all. In desperation she'd all but emptied her own veins into him, and onto the injuries he'd incurred -- again, there had been no obvious response. His entire body was burned in varying degrees.

Gabrielle bit into her bottom lip and swallowed the torrent of tears that were demanding release. She wanted to scream her agony and anguish, she wanted to find Nicholas and tear him limb from limb. None of it would help the master vampire she adored. She bent forward and kissed his temple, heedless to the rancid taste of his blistered skin. He was still LaCroix, and she still loved him more than her own life. If anything, her loyalty had become stronger and she promised him with every minute that passed that he **would** be avenged.

She rose and walked around the bed, settled next to him and took his lifeless hand in hers. She'd removed the silver ring. Polished and gleaming, it now adorned the index finger of her left hand. Her look moved over him again, caressed every familiar inch of his slender body with her mental touch. She smiled at the remembered feel of him, the glorious passion of his lovemaking. She could be with him a thousand years, and she would never stop wanting him; his touch, and his obsessive desires, the insanity they shared as totally as their lust for each other.

That she lay next to a corpse, in the truest sense of that word, did not touch Gabrielle's mind. LaCroix slept. She refused to accept anything else. It didn't matter that any probe into his mind revealed nothing beyond the complete blackness that had marked his passing into his present state. Gabrielle would not believe he was lost to her.

LaCroix **slept**.

Gabrielle had erected barriers to surround and protect him, her energy so intently focused on that single goal that she no longer lived beyond his sanctuary. Her psychic abilities had expanded and grown formidable throughout her life with LaCroix, she secretly vowed that no one would ever find him. If

it took a year, or ten, she would permit none to suspect he lived, until he was able to again walk among them and take his place as master to his Family.

* * *

The Raven was unusually quiet when Gabrielle entered, and she laughed softly when she spotted Janette at the end of the bar, clearly waiting and watching for her arrival.

"Business seems to be slow tonight," the redhead observed as she stopped next to the lovely brunette.

"It's still early, Gabrielle," Janette shrugged. "You have a great deal of nerve coming here as you have."

"And why is that?"

"I don't run a delivery service, chéri!" Janette snapped softly.

"I've found a source, which is why I dropped by," Gabrielle countered with eerie coolness.

"Why are you staying here at all, Gabrielle?"

The younger vampire drew in a shaky sigh of air and squared her shoulders to face Janette. "Is there a reason why I should not remain in Toronto?"

"Only if you intend to seek revenge for LaCroix's death," Janette cautioned, her tone uneasy.

"If I wanted revenge, Nicholas would have died minutes after LaCroix, Janette, have no doubt about that truth."

Janette looked openly sceptical. "You are too much LaCroix's mistress to be this accepting of his destruction."

"And you are too much his child to question what Nicholas has taken from me," Gabrielle spat back, fury creating a golden flicker behind the pale grey of her eyes. "What difference will it make where I am, Janette? I have no life without him."

For several moments, Janette said nothing. She carefully weighed the words against the grief that emanated from Gabrielle in crushing waves of anguish. The woman's love for LaCroix was a marvel to Janette even after three centuries of awareness of the emotion.

"You must find a life, Gabrielle. Without LaCroix, you may even find the happiness he refused to allow us."

The indifference was feigned, and some part of Gabrielle recognised that fact. Yet, the sting in the words struck deeply.

"Goodbye, Janette," Gabrielle said with a chilly smile. It deepened dramatically when Janette's eyes widened and a delicate shudder shook her slender frame.

Janette watched the other woman glide from the club, and tried to ignore the distinct remnant of LaCroix's presence in her mind.

* * *

It took all her concentration, and the gathered psychic energy of the vast city, but Gabrielle eventually established the mental link with Vixen. The girl's erratic and violent thought patterns created a tremor of distaste in the redhead, and she quickly pushed past the reaction to take a firmer hold of the other woman's mind. Gabrielle drew in the essence of LaCroix's personality, plucked it from the air around them, and directed her will at the unsuspecting Vixen.

Gabrielle's fingers tightened on the lifeless hand clutched in hers, and she drove deeper into the mind of LaCroix's ex-lover. The girl's desire for him was still obsessive and easily tuned to Gabrielle's need. The psychic planted the illusion she wanted, wove it into Vixen's being, convinced the girl she was blood bound to the master she worshipped so fervently. It was not a difficult task; Vixen had desperately wanted the blood bond, and Gabrielle was so adept at being LaCroix's shadow that it was effortless to persuade Vixen that it was the master vampire and not his lover who now directed the game. In some macabre amusement, Gabrielle also told Vixen that it was she, and not Gabrielle, who was LaCroix's last lover. Vixen, once Mary Alyce, was to avenge his passing, at all costs. It was LaCroix's will, his final request of his most faithful lover -- he demanded retribution.

Laughter, dark and tainted with madness echoed softly in the huge master bedroom of LaCroix's estate. Gabrielle caressed the dead limb that rested between her hands, and she carefully raised LaCroix's upturned palm to her lips.

"It begins, Nicholas," she whispered to the still air.

* * *

Several months passed, during which time, Gabrielle rarely left LaCroix's side. Alyce continued to be Gabrielle's eyes and ears -- not that the psychic needed her reports. The former scientist quickly discovered that Gabrielle often knew more about what went on outside the estate than she did. But, the mayhem had begun, orchestrated and manipulated by a hand as adroit and deadly as LaCroix's had always been.

No one suspected the truth -- that a madness born of love and equalling the master vampire's sheltered and protected him behind a chimera of bloodthirst and vengeance.

* * *

Consciousness returned slowly ...

Some distant part of his mind understood it should not have been this

way. Still, the effort had to be expended if he was to emerge from the darkness that held him prisoner. Pain hovered too near, and a tiny twitch of fear stirred when he realised how much agony he'd suffered recently. It seemed the only clear memory he possessed. Anguish and hatred dominated his existence -- two feelings he was extremely weary of experiencing.

Fire ...

There had been fire that night. It was everywhere, and there had been no escape. Terror forced movement. His hand rose and came to rest over his heart. The small shift of motion woke a million sensors of pain. He hadn't known anything like this in a thousand years. Longer. Smoke again filled his lungs, the memory so vivid he believed for several disoriented seconds that he remained in the inferno.

Heat ...

Searing, lethal flame that stripped the flesh from his bones. Sweat beaded on his brow, and the reaction reassured him of his continued survival. As if to prove him wrong, the blackness seized him another time. The talons of Morpheus curled around him and drew him deep into the abyss of darkness.

Silently, he screamed ...

* * *

Gabrielle heard the mental scream and it left her on her knees, gasping and clutching at the chair she'd just slid from. Alyce watched her, eyes round with fright.

"LaCroix ... " It was a moan of excruciating pain. Gabrielle closed her eyes, tears streamed from behind the fluttering lids to create scarlet streaks across pale ivory cheeks.

Alyce moved to kneel beside the stricken woman, and slowly pulled her into a shaky embrace. Gabrielle's entire body shuddered, the reaction woke fear inside Alyce. For indeterminate minutes, they remained as they were, panic warring differently inside each of the ancient vampire's children. Finally, Gabrielle eased away.

"He's waking," Gabrielle whispered in awed joy.

"Are you sure?"

Alyce's voice was openly dubious, and for the first time she met Gabrielle's sharp stare without flinching.

"I want you to go to Victoria, Alyce. Send Charity to me, then you are free to do as you want. Contact Eric, tell him you are mine, he'll help you arrange everything."

The suddenness of the directive stunned the brunette and she helped Gabrielle to her feet automatically as she asked, "Why do you want to be rid of me now?"

Gabrielle wanted nothing more at that moment than to fly up the stairs

to her bedroom. She resisted the lure long enough to answer her unwilling disciple.

"Because you are now part of the threat which surrounds us, dear Alyce. Vixen's antics have placed LaCroix in danger again. Nicholas knows something, and Alexa is helping him figure it out. If you stay here, he'll find you."

Alyce felt a tiny spark of hope flare within her, and realised an instant too late that Gabrielle had felt it as well. The redhead's slender fingers twisted painfully in Alyce's hair and she snarled at the younger vampire, fangs bared and gleaming.

"Be **very** careful to do as I have asked, Alyce. I have no wish to destroy you, but I will do precisely that if you push me."

"I know," Alyce whispered. She fell back against the chair when Gabrielle released her with a jerk of motion.

"You wanted Nick to give you immortality so that you might watch history unfold. Now might be a good time to find out if your wish is all you had hoped it would be." Gabrielle smiled, but the expression lacked any hint of warmth. "Go away from here, Alyce. Far away. Do not interfere in my plans. Do you understand, my Alyce?"

The next few seconds felt infinite, but Alyce slowly nodded, and Gabrielle swooped from the room.

* * *

Time had long since lost any meaning to him ...

The falls into nothingness were one of the few constants in his pseudo-existence, he'd learned to appreciate them. Each time he felt the mental whisper of awareness, he discovered he was stronger. He could move without the tremendous, encompassing agony that had met each of his tentative motions a short time ago. He could not stand or sit, but he could feel life gradually returning to atrophied limbs.

His voice still refused to function ...

Not that there appeared to be anyone near enough to hear if he had called out. Memories tweaked at his mind, teased and taunted him with the knowledge that his demise had been more a cause for celebration than mourning. He was hated and feared. He was not loved by any who knew him.

"That's not true, bien-aimé," a soft, feminine voice murmured.

He wanted to turn toward the gentle warmth of her voice ...

He could not recall her name, but her happiness seemed to bathe him in a sensation of security.

"Soon," she whispered the promise so close to his mouth that the gentle ripple of air created a brief smile within him. He felt the cool touch of fingers

caressing his face, and moist lips brushed his. Sleep tugged at him, and he hadn't the strength to fight the lure ...

* * *

"Soon," Gabrielle purred quietly and stretched out on the bed beside him. "I love you so very much, LaCroix," she continued softly. Her eyes caressed him, pleased by the changes that time was sculpting. His skin was gradually clearing, the healing was becoming quicker with each day that passed, and the wound to his face no longer appeared raw and angry. Within the next month, he might yet look as he had before the fight with Nicholas.

* * *

"Why are we leaving here?"

Gabrielle laughed softly at the question and hugged Charity. She could easily understand the child's reluctance to leave yet another house that she had grown to love. They had been reunited for less than two weeks, but Gabrielle's dreams were again haunted by visions of Nicholas and LaCroix, and another of their endless battles.

"We must, little one," she soothed gently. "LaCroix is barely healed, he has not fully awakened. We need a safe place to hide."

"Nick doesn't even know you're still here," Charity argued.

"No, he doesn't," Gabrielle confirmed. "But, I sense someone close to him who is beginning to suspect."

"Janette?"

Again, soft laughter slipped past Gabrielle's lips, and she shook her head. "No, not Janette. Another who loves Nicholas as I love LaCroix. She is far too perceptive, little one."

Charity accepted the decision without further comment. She knew it would be futile to object anyway.

* * *

He felt the wetness of her mouth upon his when he stirred into consciousness. Moments later, a familiar, sweet, sticky warmth trickled down his throat and he swallowed eagerly. The taste was exquisite, and he felt his body shudder in pleasant rapture.

He wanted more ...

Hunger gnawed at his insides, and he reached for the delicate hand that had withdrawn to stroke soft touch across his forehead. She understood his need, and again pressed her torn wrist to his mouth. Once more the flow of blood wine was carried from her veins to his.

"Take what you must," she encouraged in soothing, low tones. She touched his temple with another cool kiss as he continued to drink...

* * *

His eyes opened cautiously ...

For the first time he could truly see the place in which he slept. Shadows filled the room with tranquil shades of deep grey. The window had been opened and he saw the glittering sparks of light that studded the clear black sky. The moon hung low, seemed to rest on the gently swaying treetops framed by the fluttering curtains. The pale, silver white globe cast forth a single impossibly bright beam of light that illuminated the world beneath it. A sliver of darkness passed through the ray and stopped at his bedside.

"It has been a very long time," she told him. "I had feared I would never see you again."

He knew this time his voice would not fail him ...

"Who ...?"

She smiled and sat next to him ...

For several moments her small hands cradled one of his, then she lifted it to her lips and kissed the open palm. Scarlet tears slipped from her eyes, and he felt a welcome surge of intimate power. She was radiant -- beautiful -- his -- Gabrielle. He watched in fascination as she removed a heavy silver ring from her finger and placed it on the smallest finger of his right hand.

"It is good to have you back, Master ..."

LaCroix's fingers closed over hers and held tight.

"Gabby ..."

"I love you," she whispered through the film of tears. Before she could turn away, he pulled her down to him and their lips met in a gentle kiss.

* * *

Gabrielle staggered as she entered the quiet bedroom, the bottle in her hand fumbled before she once again held it firmly and was able to complete the short walk to his bedside.

"What happened?"

There was pain in his voice, and a hint of puzzlement.

"She's dead," Gabrielle realised suddenly.

"Who?"

"Vixen."

LaCroix shifted in the bed until he was seated with his back braced against the headboard, silk sheets rustled and he laughed softly.

"You find her death amusing?" Gabrielle speculated with a raised

eyebrow.

"I find it amusing that you found such a clever way of eliminating her, my pet," he replied with icy indifference.

Gabrielle hesitated, unsure for the first time.

"I did what was necessary to protect you."

"I know." He smiled again, and the sensuality in his expression was unmistakable. "Come here, Gabrielle."

He took the bottle from her hands as she slid onto the bed and sat next to his left hip. He pulled the cork from the wine bottle and downed the contents without pause. He then placed the empty bottle on the nightstand.

"Where are we?"

"Safe," she replied in a whisper.

"I want you," he murmured seductively.

"I know, bien-aimé." Just the sound of his voice stirred the long-denied desire within her. The problem was, he could barely stand up without passing out again.

Gabrielle shivered when he reached out and cupped one of her breasts, his thumb lazily brushed over the sensitive nipple until it was rigid beneath his persuasive touch. The satin shirt she wore was a flimsy barrier, and she quickly eased away enough to pull it over her head and toss it aside. LaCroix's eyes, clear dazzling blue sapphires once more, never left her. She stood, stripped off the rest of her clothes and smiled when his gaze moved over her with hungry lust.

"This is crazy, LaCroix," she whispered when she knelt on the mattress next to him. He took her hand and pulled her toward him. She straddled his thighs and bit her bottom lip when his hands covered her breasts and massaged the firm swells of flesh. The silk sheet remained between them, and the cool material was like a caress to the insides of her thighs as she moved her restless hips against him.

Gabrielle guided his mouth to an aching nipple and her back arched in pleasure when his teeth closed on the erect tip. He began sucking and a groan of profound hunger came from her when his hand dipped between them and his fingers slid into her, quickly creating a rhythm that left her gasping and rocking against his touch. Her fangs ached, but she refused to draw his blood. Her forehead rested on his shoulder and she pressed closer to the magick of his fingers moving inside her body.

LaCroix laughed, the rich tone resonant with satisfaction. He turned her face into his neck, held her mouth against the vein in invitation. One hand traced the curve of her spine, held her tightly in place as his other hand probed deeply and deftly into her warmth. She moaned loudly as her body spasmed in agonised rapture, and LaCroix winced for the briefest moment when her fangs penetrated his flesh. Minutes later another shudder shook her in his arms as he tore open her throat and drank.

* * *

Gabrielle felt him drift into sleep, and she remained curled into his side, happier than she had been in almost a full year. Her body ached for his possession, and she trembled with the intensity of her need for him. The brief taste of his blood was a tantalising reminder of what it had always been like to be with him. Gabrielle closed her eyes and sighed.

A tiny ripple of warning shocked her from her blissful slumber, and she eased free of his loose embrace. Had she imagined it? She reached outward, searched the shielding that surrounded LaCroix and kept his presence hidden. There was nothing, only the stillness of the night itself.

Apprehension and tension formed a knot in the pit of her stomach. They were beginning to suspect. **Alexa** was beginning to suspect that all that had happened was an elaborate, deceptive cloak. Panicked, Gabrielle focused her mental powers, augmented by the city and the man next her, and she created stronger barriers around them. No one, absolutely no one was to be given access to LaCroix.

The door to the bedroom swung inward on silent hinges. Gabrielle nodded when Charity hesitated, then watched the child come into the room. She stopped at the foot of the bed.

"What is it, little one?"

Charity's look darted to LaCroix, spotted the wounds on his neck and quickly found their twins on Gabrielle's throat. She thought she'd felt their passion earlier, but was mildly surprised nonetheless.

"Eric called, Dr. Hunter has gone to South America."

"Is that all?"

"What else is there?"

Gabrielle sensed the annoyance in Charity and her brows drew together in consternation. "Why are you so angry, pet?"

"Don't call me that!" the girl snapped in uncharacteristic irritation.

"Why?"

"That's what **he** calls you," she hissed, her hate-filled look moved to the silver-haired vampire who slept next to Gabrielle.

"Why do you hate him so, Charity?" Gabrielle asked, genuinely worried by the girl's open wrath. She had never liked LaCroix, but Gabrielle could never recall seeing before this depth of aversion to his presence.

"He took you away from me," Charity said eventually. "He hurts you, all the time, and you let him. I hate him for that."

"I love him, Charity. I have always loved him, in spite of our ... differences," Gabrielle offered weakly, touched by the young girl's loyalty and concern.

"You're obsessed with him, Gabrielle," the child smiled, suddenly

years older than her brief life should have allowed her to be. "He fucks you, and you call it love!"

"Charity!" There was sincere shock and undeniable anger in the single word, and Gabrielle's eyes glowed dangerously.

"Let the child speak freely, my pet." LaCroix's sardonic tone was a purr of sound behind her, and Gabrielle shivered when he ran an icy finger down the centre of her bare back. "She is refreshingly honest."

"What?" It was a stutter of confusion, and Gabrielle turned to look into her lover's pale eyes.

"We are obsessed. And you do love it when I fuck you, pet," he smiled.

"You bastard!" Charity leapt onto the bed and made a well-aimed lunge for LaCroix's throat.

Gabrielle sprang forward and intercepted the girl. Her arms went around Charity's waist and they ended up a flailing tangle of limbs tumbling to the floor. Gabrielle could feel the fury within LaCroix as she tried to subdue her young companion. It took several minutes, but she finally had the girl locked firmly in her arms. Gabrielle's wide grey eyes grew huge with fright when she saw that LaCroix had risen from the bed and now towered over them.

He was naked, and totally unconscious of that mortal vanity. Moonlight caught the silver hair and made it glow, his skin, pale and flawless once again was washed ivory by the cool radiance. The unnatural beauty that defined LaCroix's stunning features was vividly alive in the glittering indigo eyes that bored into her.

"Get her out of here before I destroy you both!" he hissed.

It wasn't until Gabrielle had ushered the still snarling child from the master bedroom that LaCroix permitted himself to sit again. Pain pulsed throughout his body, and he knew it would be several more days before all traces of weakness left him.

* * *

Gabrielle trembled, the reaction beyond her ability to control. She'd sensed the change in him long before she neared the room; the whisper of reawakened power and the overwhelming strength of his personality. LaCroix was once again in full control of his life. Her nerves were drawn tight with anticipation, a perception that became more enhanced as she caught the distinct scent of lust that filled the air.

"You found my gift," Gabrielle observed quietly when she entered the bedroom and closed the door with a soft push.

LaCroix turned from the window and watched her approach, he could feel the wariness and the flicker of fear that lingered within her. She had been

edgy around him since Charity's childish attack several nights ago. He smiled. Her gift had been the exquisite velvet robe he now wore. Black and silver, outrageously expensive no doubt, and luxurious against the newly healed body wrapped within its warmth.

"How do you feel?" she asked, and handed him the bottle of blood she'd brought with her.

"How do I look?" LaCroix taunted, his tone mocking and teasing at the same time.

Gabrielle allowed her gaze to move over him, the shock of his attractiveness like a physical jolt to her nervous system. She opened her mouth, but no sound emerged. LaCroix's free hand tangled in her hair and she stared up into his brilliant sapphire eyes.

"No answer, pet?" he murmured before he brushed a light kiss over her quivering lips.

"Sometimes, my love," she managed hoarsely, "you defy words." It wasn't entirely poetic whimsy, she realised as she drowned in the wash of desire that filled his beautiful gaze. She had always thought LaCroix the most extraordinarily stunning man she'd ever seen.

"Drink," he directed, and passed the wine bottle back to her.

"But ..."

"Drink it, Gabrielle."

His tone brooked no argument. She pulled the cork and put the bottle to her lips.

"All of it."

His intense, glowing gaze locked with hers and dared her to oppose him. She didn't. Minutes later she set the empty bottle on the bedside stand. LaCroix slid the rich heavy robe off his shoulders, tossed it aside and drew her into his arms. The shudder that rippled through her as her body made contact with his brought a sensual smile to LaCroix's austere features.

LaCroix bent his head to hers, caught her mouth in a caress that had her clinging to him minutes later when he lifted her in his arms and placed her in the centre of the huge bed. He didn't break their kiss as he tugged at the buttons of her blouse, then slid it open. Bare skin met bare skin when he settled over her, the sensation created a shiver that was shared. His tongue explored with growing hunger, drank in the taste of her mouth against his, and the faint metallic bitterness of the blood she'd consumed. She pulled back with a gasp and LaCroix continued his sensual assault, his lips glided over her cheeks, grazed her mouth again, then moved to the base of her throat. She moaned and arched into him, her arms tightened around his back.

He eased away from her with obvious reluctance. She stared up at him and he silently commanded her to undress. The order was sent directly into her mind, something she didn't appear to notice as she eagerly did as he asked. LaCroix leaned over her, his eyes filled with appreciation and passion.

Gabrielle traced the fullness of his bottom lip and drew him into another provocative kiss. His hands moved of their own volition, rediscovered the lush lines of her body, and the power his touch had over her. She was shaking uncontrollably when he spoke again, the same soft command that entered her thoughts without passing his lips.

Gabrielle paused for an instant, then complied when he repeated the directive with more pressure behind it. She visibly shuddered, and rolled onto her stomach. Again, LaCroix's body covered her, and she curled into the bed when his lips trailed kisses along her spine. His hands brushed soft touch over her thighs, parted them to more intimate exploration. He raised her hips off the mattress and entered her swiftly. She cried out and he felt her press back to take him deeper into her. He thrust forward, his hands found hers and their fingers entwined.

The smooth rhythm of LaCroix's hips made her writhe under him, and he whispered soothing, deceptively loving words to her -- all in silence as he moved as deeply into her mind as he did her body. He felt her defences, and for the first time, found a weakness in them. He released her hands and reached under her to pull her upward with him as he sat back on his heels.

She tossed her hair to one side, it streamed down his back as her head rested against his shoulder. Razor sharp fangs penetrated her neck in the same instant that he pierced the shielding she'd always had against his complete possession. She screamed in combined fury and lust, and undeniable pain. LaCroix drank, and held her immobile while he destroyed her last reserves of strength. He felt the barriers crumble totally as the overload of sensory perceptions defeated her and she slipped into unconsciousness.

* * *

Awareness returned slowly, and she sobbed as she understood what had happened. The dark, brooding intensity of LaCroix's seduction should have warned her. Instead, her hunger for the ancient vampire had made her even more foolishly blind. She tried to move, only then realised he was still within her.

"Gabrielle?"

She shivered, an involuntary response to the silkiness of his tone. They were lying on their sides, spooned together, bodies intimately joined. She sighed softly, hated herself for the desire his touch incited even in this situation. He'd just betrayed her trust irrevocably, yet all she wanted was to feel him moving within her, taking her over the edge into the insanity they shared so completely in each other's arms.

"You have used our power well, ma bien-aimé," he assured her with a velvety stroke of his tongue across her shoulder. He raised her hand and kissed the palm before he finally eased free of her. Long enough to roll her

onto her back, then he entered her again.

"You've taken everything this time, LaCroix," she whispered. "Why? All you had to do was ask?"

"I will not be shut out of your mind again, Gabrielle," he promised darkly. "Do not even attempt it."

She knew it would be useless to try to block him. He'd grown more powerful than ever during his months of healing sleep. She could no longer deny him anything.

"Alexa Foxworth suspects that you live," she told him, wondering as she did so if it was one of the things he'd taken from her mind during her unconsciousness.

LaCroix didn't bother to answer her. His mouth descended on hers, and passion expanded to encompass them both.

* * *

It had begun almost immediately, LaCroix's renewed obsession with Nicholas. He demanded that she tell him about the dreams that were plaguing her with increasing frequency. When she would refuse him, he raped her, or seduced her; she could never anticipate which approach would give him more pleasure at any given time. His most recent threat was to throw her out.

"Please, LaCroix? Do not ask me to leave you?"

"I am not asking you, Gabrielle," he replied with a cold smile. "You have refused me, and I no longer have any need of you."

"After all that's happened?" she pleaded. "I've protected you for months! Vixen's destruction changed all that, LaCroix. They'll know, soon." If they don't already, she added silently.

"You know why I came to Toronto, Gabrielle," he smiled.

"He almost destroyed you!"

"But he did not, and I will still have back what is mine, my pet."

"I should never have searched for you," she whispered as she turned away from his laughter. "I should have accepted your death in Nick's loft."

"Go, ma chéri," he purred insanely. "I don't think you have the heart for what is ahead of me."

Gabrielle shuddered. And you don't have the vision to see, nor the stability to understand what is ahead of you, bien-aimé. She shivered again when he stepped behind her and drew her into his arms as his lips touched the base of her neck. The feel of LaCroix's body pressing against her was waking familiar longing. His hands slid around her hips and pulled her more snugly to him, she could feel his arousal and squirmed against him.

"You can't leave me, can you?" he whispered, satisfaction filled the rich tone of his voice.

"I don't know," she gasped breathlessly. "I've never tried."

LaCroix slowly turned her to face him, and again he moulded her soft contours to his tall frame.

"Is this your newest pet, LaCroix? Your taste appears to be improving."

Gabrielle winced at the anger that shot through LaCroix's mind when the unfamiliar voice spoke so unexpectedly.

"Marcellus," the master breathed quietly. He refused to release Gabrielle, despite her attempts to step away from him. "What took you so long?"

"Your call didn't mention a time frame," the other man remarked with a flippant smirk.

Gabrielle trembled as he met her eyes and held the look for endless moments. His voice was like LaCroix's; ancient, resonant with power and assurance. His face ... she sighed involuntarily. Marcellus Quintas Galen was as devastatingly attractive as LaCroix, but in a completely opposite way. Dark and mysterious, hair and eyes twin shades of ebony. He could command legions of hearts, as well as the legion of Enforcers she would soon learn he was leader to.

The contact lasted seconds, in that brief span of time they knew each other intimately. LaCroix's arms were still around her, yet Gabrielle felt cold, unrelenting fear for the first time in his presence. Despite his handsome face and keen intelligence, Gabrielle disliked Marcellus -- she would be forced to concede much later that it was not the warrior she disliked, but the fear he created within her each time he looked at her. Still, she suspected the aversion had been entirely reciprocated.

"Leave us, Gabrielle," LaCroix ordered as he let go of her. When she appeared to hesitate, he speared her with a look that was eloquent warning of dire repercussions if she didn't obey him. She did as he requested.

"And you have her trained well too," Marcellus observed in the same casual, unconcerned manner he had exhibited upon entering the room.

* * *

Marcellus infuriated LaCroix with every word he spoke, and the master vampire seethed for hours after their brief meeting. Gabrielle had felt the fury in him long before he joined her in their bedroom.

LaCroix's hands encircled her waist and he spun her around to face him, anger snapped in the pale depths of his blue eyes. His hand rose and long fingers traced her features with a caressing touch that belied the emotion she felt coiled around his heart. He smiled.

"He angered you," Gabrielle whispered. "Who is he?" She had never before seen LaCroix spoken to so casually -- even she, who frequently spoke with too much disregard, rarely escaped his wrath unscathed. Marcellus had left

their home as unruffled as he had been upon entering it.

"He leads the Enforcers," LaCroix informed her. He bent to kiss her, and she tried to avoid the contact. His anger was still too close to the surface, and he knotted his hand in the heavy mane of auburn hair then crushed her lips beneath his. She whimpered in surprised pain, and LaCroix's tongue plunged deeper into her mouth.

"You're hurting me, LaCroix," she said minutes later. He was, in fact, completely without interest in their shared pleasure. He wanted her, and he was going to take her. Gabrielle caught his head with her hands and forced his glowing gaze to meet hers.

"Let me love you without your anger, bien-aimé," she pleaded softly.

"Love is not what I want from you just now, my pet," he whispered, his voice filled with overpowering sensuality. Rage flashed in her grey eyes, and he laughed.

"Then find someone who wishes to be fucked!" she retorted bitterly.

"I have someone who wishes precisely that," LaCroix responded.

"No."

"You cannot say 'no' to me, Gabrielle," he sounded amused, but this time it came with the dangerous edge of fury. His will ensnared her, subjugated her resistance.

Panic rose within her, and she trembled with the intensity of her fear when he picked her up in his arms and took her into the bedroom. She watched in a combination of mute disgust and perverse fascination as he loosened his belt, shrugged, and let the heavy silver and black velvet robe slither off his shoulders to pool on the carpetted floor.

Gabrielle hated herself as she felt her entire body flood with heat at the sight of him. Long, pale limbs were perfection to her adoring gaze, and she rose on shaky legs to remove her own clothing.

LaCroix moved with the grace and speed of a striking viper, and her back arched in a spasm of shocked elation when he lifted and impaled her with a single hard thrust. He held her tightly to him, his hands moulding her hips to his as he pressed her back to the wall. She clung to him, her arms wrapped around his neck as her tongue explored the depths of his mouth with the same demanding hunger with which his powerful body invaded her warm depths. Her legs locked around his waist and she screamed when his fangs sank into her neck with savage lust.

His anger had drained from him with the first explosion of ecstatic release, and the remainder of the night had been wild with the insatiable passion they shared in such abundance. Gabrielle worshipped LaCroix, and he loved it. Sometimes, he resented it. He would have given much for her open, pure reverence to have looked back at him from eyes that were sky blue instead of the colour of smoke and storms.

He rose from their bed an hour before dawn, felt her stir, and smiled.

His light touch on her forehead soothed the anxiousness he'd sensed. The glimmer of silver on his finger drew his attention from her sleeping features. For several moments, he hesitated, then he removed the ornate, ancient band. He opened her palm, placed the ring there, then closed her fingers over it.

"I will call you back to me, Gabrielle," he promised. As he had once before, LaCroix felt the pull of regret in his heart. She had adored him from the moment they'd met. Their obsessions were entwined and treacherous, and he couldn't afford the distraction she created within him each time he looked at her. She'd never leave him, he had to drive her away by refusing to have her close to him. She'd hate him, but in time, she'd understand. He would find her, and reclaim her -- after he'd faced Nicholas and dealt with the knight's greatest betrayal.

* * *

Gabrielle's search for him had been long and futile. She'd found Charity, broken and drained on the stairs. Her heart had threatened to break, she would never forgive herself for taking the girl away from Victoria. She even met with Marcellus, pleaded with him to tell her where she would find LaCroix. The Enforcer refused her, as she'd known he would. With no other option available, Gabrielle accepted LaCroix's decision to leave her, and forced herself to abandon the search for a man who clearly no longer wanted her.

She had decided to return to Victoria, then moved to San Francisco when Victoria's memories quickly became too much to bear.

She wore his ring and its constant presence kept his mind alive within hers. Until she had been afraid she'd never be free of his hold, and had removed the band from her hand. It had been that choice which had led her to decide to rebuild a life that did not revolve around the pale, compelling presence of her lover.

It had helped. The ring sat in an embellished, antique case upon her dressing table. She never touched it after she had set the large, heavy silver ring into the cushion of velvet.

* * *

The sun had barely set when the world around Gabrielle went painfully berserk. She had just risen from her bed, was enroute to the bathroom when the first wave of the mental assault brought her to her knees. She felt his madness, LaCroix's slip into total insanity. She screamed denial at the endless waves of torture and agony that he had endured as well as created throughout the millennia of his life. Her body was being torn open by the crush of images that she would never truly recall. His pain clawed at her heart, and she sobbed in excruciating anguish.

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It had helped. The ring sat in an embellished, antique case upon her dressing table. She never touched it after she had set the large, heavy silver ring into the cushion of velvet.

* * *

The sun had barely set when the world around Gabrielle went painfully berserk. She had just risen from her bed, was enroute to the bathroom when the first wave of the mental assault brought her to her knees. She felt his madness, LaCroix's slip into total insanity. She screamed denial at the endless waves of torture and agony that he had endured as well as created throughout the millennia of his life. Her body was being torn open by the crush of images that she would never truly recall. His pain clawed at her heart, and she sobbed in excruciating anguish.

His life, vast, incomprehensible, poured into her mind. She never felt the flood of blood that spilled from her mouth and eyes as his tenuous hold on the reality he had created slipped inexorably beyond his grasp. She drowned with him.

Eric found her, lying in a pool of blood.

It would be weeks before she was able to speak, and weeks more until she was able to think clearly enough to decide what she wanted to do. During that time, the dreams changed, and new terror woke inside her.

* * *

She heard the voice, distant, indistinct, terrifying because of the words it spoke.

'He should be destroyed, while it's still possible.'

Gabrielle felt the sickness begin to churn within her stomach. They spoke about LaCroix. Someone, somewhere, possessed the means and opportunity to destroy her lover. She fought her way free of the vision, and sat up in her bed. She leaned forward, her forehead on her crossed arms where they rested on her bent knees. A heavy sigh escaped her, and she trembled with the force of the pain that assailed her. It had been this way for so long, this gaping wound in her chest where her heart had been torn from her the night he had sent her from him.

* * *

The voices continued to grow louder each night, the ones that threatened his life.

First the nightmare had drained her. When she'd fallen back into slumber, dazed and without knowledge of the dream, she had heard the terrifying words. Finally, she could take no more. That evening, before she went to her bath, she retrieved the ring from its coffin and willingly branded herself LaCroix's servant once again.

Standing before the mirror she looked at the reflection in critical appraisal. She saw nothing to entice him. Grey eyes were dull, lifeless in the truest sense of that word. She was paler now than she had ever before been, and the heavy flow of auburn hair framed features that seemed impossibly aged by pain and loss. Her gaze dropped lower. Scars marred her throat, remnants of his rage. He'd almost destroyed her that night, because she threatened to leave him. The irony was bitter -- months later he'd left her. Lower still, above the swell of her left breast was the tiny symbol that she'd worn since her birth.

They did this to you that night. They called you witch and sentenced you to death.

Shaking fingers caressed the tiny cross, and for a moment her head fell back and her eyes closed as she recalled the sensation of LaCroix's fingers on her skin. She shuddered and let her touch move more provocatively against her own form. Delicate fingertips brushed against a hypersensitive nipple, fondled it, and she shivered. Her free hand glided across her belly and slipped between dampened thighs.

The Cross. LaCroix. She had been born his possession, with his brand upon her body, devoid of the soul he'd claimed lifetimes earlier.

Her body spasmed as her mind filled with the remembered feel of him. Tears streamed from beneath her closed eyelids.

It was decided.

* * *

Eric watched her from the doorway of the small office. Gabrielle's features were a study in sorrow and confusion, just as they always were when LaCroix filled her thoughts. She'd looked lost for so long, the young vampire reflected with a sadness tinged by anger. He'd been astonished when she'd returned, briefly, to Victoria and requested that he move with her to San Francisco. But, as their master had already suspected, Eric had fallen in love with the beautiful woman -- he could no more refuse her than he could LaCroix had the ancient made a similar demand of him.

She twisted the heavy silver ring that adorned the index finger of her left hand. It was the most obvious betrayal of her mind's thoughts -- she caressed the centuries old ring as though its owner would feel her touch. Maybe he would, Eric conceded. The bonds that tied Gabrielle and LaCroix ran far beyond those common even among their kind. In his more honest moments, Eric frequently wondered how she had survived this long without LaCroix's presence.

"It's been almost a year, Gabrielle," he whispered. "When does it end?"

"What?"

She was vague and disoriented, as though the question totally bewildered her. She frowned at him when she saw the query repeated in his deep blue eyes.

"I feel danger all around him," she murmured, her voice betrayed both her fear and her uncertainty.

"LaCroix **is** the danger, Gabrielle!"

The frown became a glare.

Eric held his ground and came further into the office. When she rose and stood at the long window that overlooked the busy main street of Chinatown, he continued toward her. With a sigh, Eric wrapped his arms

around her waist and gently pulled her back against him. Her head fell to his shoulder and he felt her smile.

"I did the right thing, didn't I, Eric?"

"Yes," he replied without a second's hesitation.

Deep inside her, Gabrielle felt the denial, heard his fear whispering to her consciousness. It had been this way for several months, but she had deliberately forced the murmurs into silence. He had driven her away, and she had come to view his rejection as the only act of generosity he had ever granted. Still, the recollection burned within her, and her eyes flooded with tears that were no longer pure scarlet.

Eric felt the tremor that shook her slender frame and he held her a little tighter.

"You're planning to leave, aren't you?"

"He needs me."

"He's needs no one, Gabrielle. Have you forgotten it was LaCroix who sent you away?"

"I've forgotten nothing, Eric," she returned. Anger snapped in her eyes when she pulled away and stared up at him. "Especially how much I love him."

Eric sighed heavily and glanced out the window.

"I adore him, Eric. That's not something **you** don't know. He is--"

"Your life," Eric interrupted furiously. "Yes, Gabrielle, I **do** know that much. You won't allow there to be anything, or anyone else!"

His eyes swept over her, the appreciation and love natural now. She was beautiful, and he wanted her more than anything he'd ever known in his young life. LaCroix's possession had taught him passions that frightened him, and he **did** understand her hunger for the ancient vampire. But, he'd learned to be free of his master's aura, why couldn't this lady he loved so dearly?

"Because he bound me to him as he did few others, Eric," she answered the blond's thoughts and his heart. "There is no room in my heart for another, LaCroix fills me, his blood is mine. Even his madness is mine at times. He is all there is for me."

"He doesn't have to be," Eric denied. The truth was, he didn't understand, and equally true was the fact that he didn't in his heart want to. He wanted Gabrielle -- with the same hunger with which she craved LaCroix.

"I love you, Gabrielle," he told her, his voice fervent with the intensity of his passion. "Has LaCroix ever said those words to you?"

She looked away, torn by the pain in her heart, and the torment in his beautiful eyes. He cut right to the core of her being with his taunt, and agony poured from the unhealed wound like blood from a victim's throat.

"It doesn't matter, Eric. What he says or doesn't say makes no difference, I belong to him. I **have** tried, Eric! You know that better than

anyone."

"I know you've become more real since you've been away from him. You're not crazy, Gabrielle -- not the way he made you when he dictated every thought you had."

"You assume he ever stopped," she laughed softly. "Every moment of every night, LaCroix is all I think of, all I hunger for."

"Is that why you wear his ring again?" Eric asked. It had been missing for months. A few days ago, it had returned to its place on her hand. He had spotted it again after a particularly horrid nightmare had awakened her in the middle of the day. He'd gone running to her bedroom to find her screaming denial at whatever images were flooding her mind. She hadn't sounded sane; she'd sounded completely insane with terror. She'd been unconscious when he reached her, and when she had regained awareness many hours later, she recalled nothing. That lack of knowledge horrified Eric; he'd come to expect her to know things in much the same way LaCroix had always known.

"I took it off because I was afraid it would keep the ties strong and taut. I think he knew that when he left it with me. He wanted me to go, but he did not want me to stray too far from his influence."

"And like the dutiful slave, you have obeyed your master."

Gabrielle bristled at the arrogant disdain in his tone, and she took a step closer to him as her grey eyes snared his.

"There was a time, young Eric, when you trembled at his name. A time when you despised me because he would not have you in his bed. Don't presume to judge what I feel for him, Eric. You cannot begin to know."

Her voice had turned to ice, and the chill seized Eric's heart as he stared at her in mute anguish. The truth often cut deeply.

* * *

Gabrielle stepped up to the code box and stared at it for several moments. She felt Nicholas inside the building, felt the lovely woman who was with him. The code was taken from his mind without his knowledge. Gabrielle had learned many tricks from their master, and was most adept at using them.

She slid open the door to Knight's loft apartment. He'd rebuilt it, she shuddered. Her mind momentarily filled with images of his home the last time she'd seen it, and its destruction. She blocked the pain and horror that memory still evoked, then stepped into the room. She knew she had now been noticed by them both.

Nicholas stared, his expressive face a study in abject disbelief and wariness. Beside him, Alexa felt the tremor of power and was unable to repress the chill that settled into her bones. The stranger 'felt' like LaCroix -- regal, contained, arrogant, and deadly.

Alexa knew who she was, she'd heard her name often, but this was the

first time they had come face to face with each other. She let her eyes wander, as Nick's did just then. The woman waited, permitted them their appraisal. Alex knew it was a pretence, that she required the moments herself to face them.

She was taller than Alex and shorter than Nicholas by half a head. Long, flowing red hair cascaded down her back, grey eyes were haunted and filled with too much unwanted knowledge. She wore a loose, tailored suit of cream coloured wool. The jacket fell to just above her knees, and the pants were baggy. Under the blazer she wore a silk tanktop of shining aquamarine. Low-heeled leather boots of the same shade as the suit completed the look. She wore no make-up, and Alexa smiled at the awareness that she was more beautiful naturally than with the distraction of artifice. LaCroix had shown a remarkable change of taste when he'd chosen Gabrielle as his consort. She was everything Alexa had thought the ancient would find unappealing. It was then she glimpsed the real reason for LaCroix's fascination.

A single crimson tear trickled from the corner of a huge grey eye. Gabrielle spoke at last, her voice like rough gravel as pain rose with the words and reached outward to encompass them.

"What have you done to him?"

She brushed impatiently at the scarlet stain on her cheek, and Nick's eyes widened when he spotted the ring that glittered from her left hand. LaCroix's ring. Why hadn't he noticed its absence before now?

"He's safe, Gabrielle," Alexa pulled the other woman's gaze from Nicholas and met the rage in the grey depths with implacable calm.

"You know me, Alexa?"

"As you know me," the lovely blonde acquiesced with a smile.

"He has not been safe since Vixen's antics betrayed us," Gabrielle stated quietly, her voice filled with distraction but tainted also with disdain.

"Vixen was doing LaCroix's -- "

Nick stopped speaking when she smiled, the icy amusement in her expression another shade of LaCroix's possession of her.

"Vixen was easily convinced of things," Gabrielle laughed. "She wanted so badly to share the blood bond with him, I told her she did."

Alexa shivered. LaCroix's lady had dictated murder and mayhem as a shield to protect the master vampire while he slept.

"Why?"

"Alexa understands," Gabrielle answered the knight, but stared directly into the worried eyes of his lover.

"He is safe," Alex repeated.

"You do not lie well," Gabrielle smiled, and again they saw only LaCroix's cold hauteur in her features. "I **know** he is not safe. Nor is he able to ask for my help. I repeat, what have you done to him?"

"He thinks he's -- " Alexa paused, searched for words. None offered her an acceptable truth to give the woman in front of her. "He is no longer LaCroix."

Gabrielle's laughter was frightening.

"LaCroix's madness could never extend to that level."

"Are you sure?" Alexa asked. "Search your heart, Gabrielle. You know him, perhaps better than we."

Denial sprang to her lips, then died there as she looked from one pair of blue eyes to the other. Her anger vanished, and was replaced by agony. It struck them all like a physical blow, then dissipated. She left without another word.

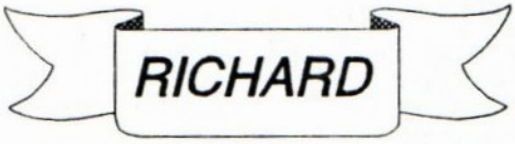
Alex stared at Nicholas, and the question arced between them; what now?

"We have to stop her."

Alexa shook her head. "We can't, Nicholas."

There was, realistically, only one man who would be able to find her, and stop her -- if he chose to ...

** The original characters of Alexa Eden Foxworth and Marcellus Quintas Galen are used herein with the gracious consent of their creator, gh coyote.*



He really was so very fine,
This baby brother, I called mine.
We teased him all the time out loud,
But he made all his family proud.
And since I was the older one,
Although he was the only son,
I know at times I overdid.
Because I cared about the kid.

But in the end, I did far more
Than I had ever done before.
So devastated he was lost,
I failed to think about the cost.
I did coerce and beg until
I bent a friend to do my will.
Against his wiser mind, prevailed,
And as he'd feared, the effort failed.

If only I had trusted he
Who's never, ever lied to me.
Then Richard's image would not taunt
And all my nightmares never haunt.
My memories would warm my heart,
Instead of tearing me apart;
And I could love my brother's name;
Not see the monster he became.

by Kathleen Y. Bergeron



Oh sure, he's just a little strange,
But even if I could arrange,
To find out what all makes him tick,
I doubt I ever would know Nick.

He has this skin condition, see;
Well, that's the story he tells me;
Which means he has to work at night
Avoiding at all costs, daylight.

He doesn't act much like the rest
No donut stops, Schanke attests.
But, oh that mind that will not quit,
Makes up for all that doesn't fit.

So in the end, it's to the good
I do not ask more than I should.
So I accept without remorse,
And have the best cop on the force.

by Kathleen Y. Bergeron



It looks a little bulky;
Mileage, we won't discuss.
That ancient Caddy Nick loves so
Reminds one of a bus.

I wonder sometimes whether Don
Would cringe if he could know,
Just why it is Nick chose this car;
Not just "get up and go".

For nowhere in his wildest dreams
Could Schanke ever have thunk
Nick likes this car because it has
A dark, enormous trunk.

I think the vital question
And it's completely fair,
Is just for Don to ask of Nick,
"What do you **keep** in there?"

Imagine his surprise and shock
If Nick replied with glee,
"Well, there's a tire jack in there . . .
And other times, there's me!"

by Kathleen Y. Bergeron

UNE PURE FORMALITÉ

by

Wolfe Heart

PARIS, 1920 ---

"Going out again, my dear?" The question floated softly from the library. Janette didn't need to look in to see who spoke to her, the unmistakable voice of LaCroix still echoed in her head. She'd felt his return to the house several hours earlier, and had deliberately avoided him. It had been so peaceful recently, and past experience gave her the unwanted knowledge that all that was about to change now that the Master was once again in residence.

"Yes," she retorted a little too sharply. She winced, it wouldn't do to piss him off quite this soon, she chided herself. The internal warning still didn't prompt her into giving him an explanation of where she was headed, nor with whom she was planning to spend her evening. Before she could reach the château door, LaCroix called out again, an unquestionable taunt in his resonant voice.

"Out with Isabella again, are we? This new friend of yours is making quite an impression. You must bring her by one of these nights so we can all enjoy her company," he said.

Janette stopped in her tracks, took a deep breath, then turned around and headed for the library. He'd been back less than a day; 'how in hell did he know about Isabella already?' she fumed silently. As she entered the chamber, she took immediate note of his presence. LaCroix, majestic and sophisticated as always, sat in an over-sized chair next to the great hearth. By the flickering light of the fire, he was reading the LONDON TIMES. Scattered around his feet were the numerous international papers that he had been glancing through. LaCroix didn't look up. Nor did he move when Janette finally spat an answer to his taunt.

"Not bloody likely!"

Now, had Janette been behind the paper she would have noticed that LaCroix cocked an expressive eyebrow at her remark. He was too bored to reproach his child, but he made a mental note to do so in the future.

Before the barbed exchange could escalate into a genuine disagreement, Janette spun on her heel and left him again. She headed for the door and slammed it behind her. The solid thud of the heavy pine sheet echoed in the hollow foyer long after her departure.

Janette had met Isabella a few months ago during a seminar she was attending. (Some of the most intriguing young men could be found at these gatherings, she had discovered.) Surprisingly, the lovely brunette had taken an instant liking to the woman because of her wonderfully sarcastic humour, and wistful innocence. She had quickly cast herself in the role of Isabella's protector, of sorts. Eventually, she had even introduced her to Nicholas. The young knight was as charmed by the woman as Janette had been.

Actually, Janette had been feeling rather good for the past few months. Besides making a new friend with whom she felt a bond, which in itself was rather remarkable considering she didn't make friends easily, LaCroix was spending a great deal of time away from the château. Lately, she'd actually been able to relax a little. It was amazing how, when relieved of fear, the body functions almost normally.

Janette also noticed that Nicholas had taken a more than causal interest in Isabella, and she in him. Feeling rather self-confident, the beautiful vampire decided to play match-maker -- **without** LaCroix's interference. It wouldn't be easy, she knew.

She knew what would happen if LaCroix found out, but she was determined that if only this once, Nicholas would get a break. She loved the former knight, and she was truly tired of seeing him at their Master's mercy. She'd find some way to allow him this small happiness.

Tonight they were to meet outside the 'Théâtre des Auteurs Dramatique'. She and Isabella were meeting with Nicholas after his class. The former knight's newest pursuit was yet another series of lessons in painting. Despite his being an accomplished artist, Nicholas continued to learn still more styles to add to his own unique interpretations. Tonight, the trio was supposed to see a new play. Janette was certain it would prove to be an entertaining evening because the play had heavy sexual overtones and she knew that Isabella would be good for a few deliciously ribald comments. She arrived early at the Théâtre and decided to wait outside for her late companions. She lounged on the pew-like bench under the lamp post and watched the night pass by. Much to her amusement she was getting the usual "night-time" remarks. It seemed her choice of the low-cut crimson dress had made an impression on the male passers-by, and she did have to admit, she looked good. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the steady pulse of heartbeats and the warm scent of blood in untapped veins.

"Hey, slut! Earned enough for shelter tonight?" came a voice in the distance. Janette didn't need to open her eyes, she knew who was commenting.

"Here, give the poor dear a few centimes so she can send a message home and have a carriage sent to pick her up." A coin was tossed onto her lap. Janette giggled. She picked up the coinage and dropped it down the front of her dress, an action she knew would draw a quick response.

"Mon Dieu! Quickly -- someone call the préfecture de police and have this hussy arrested," shrieked Isabella in obvious delight.

Nicholas, rushing to meet the ladies before the show started, was just in time to overhear the bantering. Janette had spotted him, but Isabella had no idea Nicholas was behind her.

"Mademoiselle," said Nicholas in his best authoritative voice, as he grabbed her arm, "your type of behaviour is not tolerated in this city.

Startled far more than she should have been, Isabella whirled around. She could feel the shifting array of colours that flooded her face before finally settling on vivid scarlet. Nicholas' smile was broad with delight and there was a wicked glint of enjoyment in his glittering blue eyes as her embarrassment grew. He unhanded her and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. Janette got up and smiled. Nicholas and Isabella really did look good together, she thought idly.

Janette, feeling rather smug and wicked herself proceeded to fish down the front of her dress for the coin. This promoted even more cat calls from the growing number of males who had begun to hover from the moment the beautiful ladies had staged their antics. Isabella, uncomfortable with the open attention she had unintentionally elicited quickly buried her head in Nicholas' coat. Uncontrollable laugher broke out when Janette finally produced the piece of metal and tossed it over to Nicholas.

"A small souvenir, mon chéri!" she quipped with a grin.

Nicholas caught the coin from the air, kissed it lightly, then put it in his pocket. He was still laughing to himself. Isabella who had snuggled into his neck was actually managing to make him "ticklish" from her laughter. The crowd was growing thicker and it was nearly time for the play to begin, so the grinning trio managed to collect themselves and go into the café that was serving as the 'Théâtre des Auteurs Dramatique' for the next few months. The company was a small one, just beginning, and Isabella was a promising young writer. They had chosen the play because she was eager to 'see' what her contemporaries were selling to the reckless youth that made up the bulk of this audience.

Janette wasn't disappointed. It wasn't too long into the first act before Isabella leaned over and whispered, "Just **what** kind of a play is this? That woman's naked on stage and she's got no right to be!"

Janette tried, vainly, to smother her laughter. She glanced past her friend in an effort to read Nicholas' expression. He was too busy trying to remain straight-faced to turn around and address Janette's silent enquiry.

"Mon Dieu!" Isabella breathed moments later. "What is this? I thought that was a woman!?" Isabella's wonderfully shocked voice rippled outward within the small space. At her left, Nicholas finally gave way to a choked laugh. Janette, at her other side, was curling up into a ball. The few people within ear shot appeared to be enjoying this unexpected side show better than the one on stage. There was a stir in the back, noticeable to the performers on the real stage.

Isabella, uncomfortably aware that she had once again become the centre of the attention was visibly relieved when the first intermission came.

As the crowd filed out, an elderly lady from in front of them turned and touched Isabella's arm, "My dear girl, I do hope you're coming back for the second half, you're much more entertaining than the pièce de théâtre."

Isabella blushed vividly again. It was all Janette could do to maintain her dignity and walk out of the Théâtre for some fresh night air.

As she stepped out into the coolness of the night, the scents and sounds of Paris flooded her senses. She breathed in heavily and looked around to see where Nicholas and Isabella were. She smiled. Nicholas had Isabella cradled in the nook of his arm as he helped her through the crowd. Janette waved them over to her. As her hand went up, so too did her's and Nicholas' heads. Something was definitely in the air -- or someone.

They instinctively knew they were being watched. Just as they presently watched over Isabella. Their young friend was not immune to the sudden tension in the air.

"It's gotten cold out here," she whispered, confusion and a hint of fright in her soft voice.

"Nonsense, my dear, it's a lovely evening for the Théâtre." The voice had spoken from behind her.

The hairs on the back of Isabella's neck stood on end as they all turned to face the newcomer.

"What brings you out to the 'Théâtre des Auteurs Dramatique', LaCroix? I thought your tastes were more refined than this?" Janette snapped tightly. Beside her, she noted that Nicholas pulled Isabella a little closer. The girl didn't resist his embrace.

"My lovely Janette," LaCroix smiled and took her arm, "my 'refined' tastes are extremely eclectic, as you well know. I enjoy a variety of things."

Nicholas watched LaCroix, suspicion etched into his handsome features as he awaited the Master vampire's next action.

Isabella's appraising glance swept over LaCroix's elegant form. He could feel her interest as her look grew bolder. He could hear the quickening of her heartbeat as she became aroused by his presence.

Isabella was very pleased with the look of the charming stranger, but very cautious also. Some inner voice told her he was dangerous, though she could not say why she felt it so strongly.

LaCroix was dressed for the Théâtre, but just a bit too dressed for this one. Isabella noted the long rich cloak that hung over his shoulders. The blackness was so deep it appeared darker than the night itself. Beneath the cape, he wore a black silk shirt, buttoned to the neck, and jet coloured pants that hugged the long length of his muscular legs. The only visible accessory was the large silver ring that ornamented the smallest finger of his right hand. All in all, a very impressive sight.

"Why are you here, LaCroix? I thought you were packing to go abroad again?" asked Nicholas. He knew the hopeful tone wouldn't escape the Master's notice.

"I'm bored, Nicholas. So, I thought I'd try something new tonight." LaCroix's stare was relentless as his pale gaze locked with the sapphire beauty of Nicholas'. 'So,' he thought to himself, 'my young Nicholas likes this new pet of Janette's', and the raven-haired beauty didn't seem bothered by the knight's interest in the girl. That alone gave the ancient vampire pause, and incited his curiosity.

LaCroix smiled, the expression icy as it transformed his austere features into a deceptive mildness.

"Janette, Nicholas, where are your manners? You haven't yet introduced me to this lovely lady." He held out his hand.

Janette pulled herself free of LaCroix's grip and rubbed her bruised hand. When she spoke, her tone easily revealed the depth of her anger and displeasure. Her voice was chilling. "I have the pleasure of introducing you tonight to Miss Isabella Weatherby." She offered her friend a tiny smile, and added, "This is LaCroix, chéri. We are old . . . acquaintances."

Isabella did not accept LaCroix's extended hand but he was not so easily dissuaded. He took her small limb in his and raised it to his lips. "May I escort you back into the Théâtre, Miss Isabella Weatherby?" LaCroix asked in a voice that caressed like silk.

Isabella removed her hand with some effort and looked up into LaCroix's mesmorising blue gaze.

"Non, merci. I have an escort tonight, Monsieur LaCroix, and we were about to leave." Isabella firmly looped her arm through Nicholas' and with a pleasant smile, she gently pushed Nicholas ahead of her as they stepped onto the street.

Nicholas was genuinely surprised by the sudden strength, but he smiled as he willingly moved away with Isabella. This inner reserve of quiet courage that she possessed was something he hadn't previously encountered. He found he liked it very much. As they neared the end of the block, Isabella stopped and turned around, "Janette, are you joining us?"

Janette still visible in the dim flood of light from the street lamp remained transfixed. It had been a **very** long time since anyone had dared to put

LaCroix in his place. The fact that he hadn't simply killed the young woman where she stood didn't bode well for her future well-being. Janette eyed her Master warily. She knew this was not the end of the matter. She might not be able to read his mind, but she could read that face. The hold she'd taken on his wrist when Nicholas and Isabella walked away became a clutch as she felt panic flutter in her stomach.

LaCroix too was captivated. The boredom he had been suffering from for the past few months had miraculously vanished. 'Well, well,' he thought. 'It would seem that you and Nicholas have found a most intriguing a new playmate. An impertinent little one at that. Ah well my Isabella, you **will** pay dearly for that.'

LaCroix's expression grew more speculative. He didn't notice the growing pressure of Janette's grip on his wrist.

In that moment, Janette made a conscious decision to allow Nicholas the freedom he deserved -- if only for this one night. This une pure formalité, for Nicholas, was worth the risk, she told herself.

"You two run along, I think I will spend the rest of the evening with LaCroix."

Nicholas didn't need to be told twice. Despite his certainty that Janette was shielding him, he **did** want to spend more time with Isabella. He deliberately ignored the danger that seemed to arc through the night air to brush the back of his neck in warning. He turned away quickly and disappeared with Isabella.

* * *

LaCroix finally looked down at the hand upon his wrist. Blood dripped from where Janette had applied pressure to get his attention. He slowly unwound her fingers and raised his wrist to his lips. He sensuously licked the blood, then in the same smooth flow of motion, he slapped her soundly across the face.

Janette still shaking, half from anger and half from fear, didn't even see the retribution for her injury until the sharp stab of pain brought her back to the reality of his fury. Her cheek burned and she knew he had thoroughly enjoyed the violent display of his own power.

LaCroix was seething. First, this mere wisp of a human had the audacity to refuse him. And, second, but foremost in his mind, what the hell was going on with Janette? When did she get a back bone, let alone assert herself? What a defiant little bitch she was being tonight. He'd left them alone too long apparently. They needed to be reminded of their places.

Janette's hand went to her face and she winced at the taste of her own blood in her mouth. LaCroix smiled benevolently and removed her hand to

replace it with his.

"Janette, my dear, what has come over you? You are treading on very thin ice." The 'thin' was hissed out between clenched teeth. LaCroix's long, sensitive fingers lingered a moment longer, then he withdrew his touch. He took her arm and they began to walk. "You will tell me more about this Isabella Weatherby."

Janette **had** made her mind up. Come what may, Isabella would be safe from LaCroix.

* * *

Nicholas walked along with Isabella in the refreshing night air. He mused to himself that there was more to this woman than met the eye, and he discovered that he liked that very much. He drew her closer to him as they continued their stroll along the Seine. The soft, glowing lights from the cafés danced on the water and added their winking radiance to the almost magical mood of the evening.

Isabella was becoming increasingly aware of the tingling in her body. As Nicholas drew her nearer it required more and more of her concentration to control the trembling that was creeping up on her. She knew she was becoming more attracted to Nicholas with each passing moment. The impressive man at the Théâtre was rapidly becoming a mere memory as she walked on in poetic silence with Nicholas.

Long minutes later, Nicholas interrupted her reverie.

"You must be careful of what you say to LaCroix, Isabella," he cautioned. "He is a man ones does not cross by any means."

"I sensed as much from yours and Janette's behaviour, Nicholas," she replied with a gentle smile. Concern flashed in her lovely dark eyes. "Will Janette be all right?"

"She can look after herself," Nicholas soothed, and hoped desperately that his words would prove true. As they rounded the corner, the small building that was Nicholas' home came into view. He had rented a loft where he could paint in solitude. Even Janette had not been invited to the haven he had created here. Isabella knew this was where he lived.

"Your home looks peaceful in the moonlight."

"Doesn't it?" Nicholas agreed with a smile and looked at his smiling companion. "Would you care to come in?"

"What would your neighbours say?" she grinned.

Nicholas gently pulled her forward and his fingers traced the delicate curves of her cheeks. Isabella leaned into the alluring touch. It was very pleasing. Nicholas lifted Isabella's mouth to meet his lips. As their kiss deepened, a familiar almost forgotten feeling poured into Nicholas. He felt the

happiness warm his heart, wake a protective instinct he hadn't felt in years.

Isabella's smile was filled with longing when Nicholas drew back and stared down at her. Golden hair and dazzling blue eyes were the only awareness she had, and she wanted to drown in the ocean coloured depths.

"Nicholas, take me inside?" she requested breathlessly.

* * *

Janette was recovering her composure as they walked on. LaCroix's continuous inquisition about Isabella was serving to increase her desire to protect the young Englishwoman. Until she had watched the girl walk away with Nicholas, she had not seen the resemblance -- she now understood her own motives more clearly because of the sudden flash of insight. Isabella Weatherby reminded her very much of Anastasia Montgomery, and Janette knew how deeply regretful Nicholas had felt when LaCroix had destroyed the young girl who had fallen in love with the former knight. That Janette had not raised a hand to help Anastasia had been a sore spot between them for years.

Her wandering thoughts were abruptly halted when she realised she was listening to silence. LaCroix's barrage of questions had ceased and he was staring upward into the night sky. He seemed to be reading the very air. Janette didn't like this one bit.

"What is it LaCroix?" she asked, like she didn't know.

"I think it's time I visited Nicholas' new home," he mused.

"I would prefer that you stay with me, mon amour," she purred provocatively. "We haven't had time to chat since your return, and I know you have some wonderful tales to share -- you always do when you've been away."

"As much as I enjoy your companionship, I feel that I mustn't neglect my responsibility to Nicholas." In a sweeping, grand theatrical gesture, LaCroix stretched out his cape and let the night wind fill the massive robe.

Janette frantically searched her mind for a quick method of restraint. The only thing that came into her mind was as natural to her as breathing had once been. She slipped her arms around his tall frame and reached up to touch LaCroix's cool lips with hers.

The gesture clearly came as a complete surprise to the Master. His mind whirled. 'What has happened to my Janette? My petit chéri has gone mad,' thought LaCroix. As her seduction became more evocative, LaCroix reconsidered his plan to surprise Nicholas. It might very well prove a most interesting diversion to enjoy Janette's attempts to distract him. There was also the irritating fact that it had been ages, and he meant **ages**, since a woman offered herself to him, almost willingly. LaCroix looked down at the very beautiful Janette. She may be acting insane, but what the hell. LaCroix gathered her into his arms and kissed the lush full lips. He wasn't disappointed.

"Take me home, mon amour," moaned Janette, who was already thoroughly shaken by the feelings LaCroix's passion were waking within her. The Master once again reached into the wind.

* * *

Nicholas' blood was coursing through his veins and he luxuriated in the delicious tension of sexual energy that was wrapping around him. Isabella had made no pretense of her reasons for wanting to see his loft, her hungry kisses were intoxicating and he returned them with a fervour that made her tremble in his arms. He shuddered as the last piece of his clothing fell to the floor and her soft, luscious curves moulded to him. He lifted her into his arms and they tumbled to the bed.

Eager hands and lips were seeking as they caressed and teased each other into greater excitement. Nicholas moaned low in his throat and fought down the growing strength of his vampiric nature. He'd fed before going to the Théâtre, and he **would** control this evil side of himself -- it was not blood he craved from his lover, it was her warmth and her gentle beauty -- her purity and innocence had cast light into the darkness that had once been his soul. He loved Isabella. His entire body shivered when her warm lips trailed kisses across his chest and left a trail of flushed skin in their wake. He again forced the bloodlust into submission and concentrated on the joy he was experiencing with Isabella's passionate lovemaking.

When her mouth trekked lower and closed over him, his hips rose in reactive response. His heart was pounding faster than it had in years. How long had it been since he had made love to someone without the union ending in death? He would do anything to make sure that did **not** happen this time. The restraint he imposed upon himself seemed to add to the intensity of the passion they shared.

* * *

Back in LaCroix's chambers, Janette wondered if she had lost her mind. It had been years since she'd shared LaCroix's bed, and she enjoyed the freedom she now possessed. To insure Nicholas had a precious night's love, she was risking bondage to their Master -- again. LaCroix's sexual allure was like a spell, one not easily broken, and Janette did not want to fall under that hypnotic enchantment another time.

Upon arriving at the château, he had immediately taken her to his room. As LaCroix started the fire, she recalled that he had said something about the proper light for such an occasion. His sarcasm was not a good sign for the tone of their tryst.

LaCroix had taken his cloak and flung it on the chair beside the massive four poster bed. Now, he turned his watchful gaze to Janette as he leaned against one of the huge posts that framed the bed. She stood in the middle of the floor unable to move. LaCroix broke the silence.

"You are not enjoying this, Janette," he observed with feigned regret. "I must say you were very responsive back at the walk?" LaCroix held out his hand. Janette automatically moved closer to the ancient vampire, conscious that the decision was not entirely her own.

"Disrobe."

He wasn't bothering with seduction, or enticement, and she felt a flare of anger at his disregard for her feelings. It was not, of course, the first time LaCroix had treated her like a common street whore.

Janette did as she was commanded. Tears began to stain her face, crimson streaks that were mute testimony to her fury and humiliation.

"Turn around and let me look at you," LaCroix directed, a smile lit his striking features as he absorbed the waves of rage that emanated from her. She'd be angrier yet before he was through with her, he vowed.

Again, Janette did as she was told.

"My clothes, Janette."

She knew what he expected, it was an old game, and she moved to stand in front of him. LaCroix's laughter was filled with malicious enjoyment as he watched her expert hands begin to undress him. Her fingers shook so badly due to her rage, she was hardly able to undo the buttons of his silk shirt.

As she fought to control her responsive anger, Janette repeatedly reminded herself that she did this for the young knight she loved. Nicholas had been so very unhappy for so long. He deserved this night, and Janette knew Isabella adored him as intently as he did her. Jealousy had been tempered by her own affection for the young woman.

"You're not paying attention to me, Janette," LaCroix observed as he heard the swell and ebb of her tumultuous emotions.

Her hands moved inside the shirt, stroked the smooth, powerful chest. Her fingers glided over flawless skin, enjoyed the tremors that her touch created in already taut muscles. LaCroix lifted her head and licked the tears from her face before he covered her quivering lips with a ravenous kiss.

He crushed her to his body then took her hand and guided it to the arousal that strained against her tiny figure. LaCroix moved her head down to one erect nipple and she began to tease and suck. LaCroix was very pleased with her ministrations.

After several minutes of the pleasant stimulation, LaCroix eased her away. He leaned down to cover her mouth and his tongue again explored the familiar warmth. He closed his eyes and let his body respond to the beautiful woman who writhed against him.

Janette too closed her eyes as icy hands caressed her. He knew every

inch of her body, knew exactly what would leave her begging for his possession. She could no more fight his hold than she could stop hungering for the blood that sustained her existence. LaCroix had been her first lover, none had ever erased the memory of his lust -- none had been able to light the maddened fires within her that he had created and nurtured. As if from a dream, LaCroix spoke softly into her ear, "Continue, Janette."

When she had removed the last of his clothes LaCroix moved to the bed and settled back on the cool sheets. Janette drank in the vision of him, unable to look away. She was furious with her body. As she looked at LaCroix stretched invitingly on the bed, her blood began to boil within her. She did **not** want to feel aroused by this man, but she was losing the age-old battle as she always had in the past. He was magnificent.

LaCroix, still on his back with long legs dangling over the edge of the bed, spoke again.

"Come here, my love, and finish what you started."

Janette was about to lie down beside LaCroix when he stopped her with a low laugh.

"You know where to start."

Before she could find a retort, Janette found herself between two lean, muscular thighs. She was shaking uncontrollably now. LaCroix sat up and placed her trembling lips to his pulsing member. Janette did as she was commanded. LaCroix laid back on the bed and his mind reached for the child he loved so dearly.

* * *

Nicholas groaned when Isabella's hips thrust upward into his, demanding without words. Once again, he was forced to restrain himself and not overpower the woman lying beneath him. As he slipped into her warmth, he felt the tingle of an icy finger caressing his spine. It was separate from him, yet not -- the same sense of feeling that identical twins often feel when something has happened to the other. If he permitted himself to think about it further he might figure out what is was, but right now he had far better things to concentrate on. After the initial awkwardness had been overcome, Isabella had eagerly followed his lead. She wanted nothing more than to give him pleasure, and was proving to be a most talented pupil in the art of lovemaking. Thrilled with her unabashed adoration, Nicholas planned to enjoy this to the fullest.

* * *

Isabella was unaware of the time as she snuggled even closer to

Nicholas. Some inner clock alerted her to the fact that dawn was not far away, and she simply had to return home before her guardians realised she'd been out all night. She was about to reach over and wake Nicholas, to tell him that she had to leave, but he looked so peaceful, she let him sleep.

She climbed from the rumpled bed, careful not to wake her sleeping lover. She found her small purse and rummaged in it for her lip tint. When she found it she applied several coats of the deep scarlet colour. It reminded her of blood. She smiled and went back to sit on the edge of the bed. She leaned into Nicholas' neck, her lips finding the smooth throat. When she drew back, another flicker of satisfied smile lit her features. She had left her impression on Nicholas' pale skin.

"Good night, my Prince," she whispered softly, then laughed quietly at the whimsy of her words. A few minutes later she left the loft and ventured out into the approaching dawn.

She had reached the bottom of the long flight of stairs before she spotted him. She stopped and waited as he approached her and held out his hand.

"The streets of Paris are not safe for a lovely woman alone, Mademoiselle," the rich, vibrant voice observed. "I would be delighted to escort you home."

Isabella felt a fluttering in her stomach as he stared down at her, blue eyes dazzling as the morning sky. Her smile was shy, and she bowed her head.

"Merci, Monsieur LaCroix."

* * *

Janette awoke in her own bed. Her head was ringing badly. Her mouth had an awful taste in it and her body ached tremendously. As the cloudiness left her head she remembered the previous night. She hoped it was a dream. She looked around -- she was alone in her bed. Maybe it was a dream, she thought to herself. Perhaps the entire night had been nothing more than a wildly erotic dream? She knew it was wishful thinking on her part, one never mistook LaCroix's possession for a dream. He was as savagely insatiable as he had ever been, and she had fallen into her day's sleep several hours earlier than was her wont because her body had been exhausted by his demands.

As she threw aside the bedcover and began to get up she was shocked by the lingering weakness that assailed her. Still she managed to pull herself together and dress for the night. She was to meet Isabella and Nicholas again that evening.

To her considerable surprise, when she descended the stairs, she heard the low sounds of laughter. LaCroix's rich tone was unmistakable, but it was the tinkling feminine voice which drew Janette into the salon reserved for

receiving guests.

"Isabella?" Her surprise was evident in her greeting.

LaCroix raised one perfect eyebrow, then he bowed to the two women. "I'm sure you have much to talk about," he murmured. "I hope to see you again later," he added as he kissed Isabella's hand. He left without another word.

Isabella flew to Janette's side and dragged the petite brunette into the room.

"Janette, I just the most unforgettable night," sang Isabella once they were seated before the fire.

"Me, too," replied Janette.

"I've called at a bad time," said Isabella, worried by the slight frown that had settled into Janette's lovely features. "I'll tell you later about my news."

Janette didn't bother to try to entice the 'news' from her, she already knew what the girl wanted to discuss. "Has Nicholas arrived?" she asked her friend.

"No," Isabella said with a shake of her head. "I received a message from him earlier, and he requested that we meet him at the café." She paused, her gaze drifted to the hallway outside the salon. "Perhaps it would be polite to ask Monsieur LaCroix to join us?" she suggested.

Janette quickly shook her head. She did **not** want to spend another night in LaCroix's company, not so soon.

"I'm sure he has made his plans for the evening," Janette replied sweetly. "Please, wait here and I'll get my cloak."

She crossed the entrance hall and spotted LaCroix in the library. He was seated in his usual chair, engrossed in his usual papers. He didn't look up at Janette.

"Going out again, ma chéri?" He was reading and didn't look up as he spoke.

She didn't answer.

"Out with Isabella again, are we? This new friend of yours has made quite an impression," said LaCroix. "I'll see you later then?"

The fear was back . . .



My love
Vision . . .
I am blinded by the force of my awe
You stand before me
Smiling Death
I have waited a lifetime to know you
I'm afraid
Terror holds me in the palm of your hand
My life
Laughter . . .
What life?
The empty world that pushed me away
And forced me to hide from their scorn
Rebirth . . .
Teach me your power
Show me the passion that fills your eyes
Take my soul as the price I will pay
All that matters is you
Knowledge . . .
It took me so long to see
You are life
In the guise of death
I am yours
Bride of the night
My Prince is darkness
I adore you
Slave to your desires
Yet freer than I have ever been
I died in your arms
To live at your side
Eternity . . .
Will it be long enough?
Vision . . .

I am blinded by the force of this pain
He stands before me
Death Bringer
I waited a mortal lifetime to know you
I was afraid
Terror holds me again
This time in the wake of your destruction
He tells me to live
That I have my life back
My life
Laughter . . .
What life?
I died in your arms
To live at your side
Eternity . . .
It was not long enough
Rebirth . . .
The sun is rising at last
How long has it been?
Smiling Death
Ecstasy . . .
I adore you
Slave to your desires
Yet freer than I have ever been
Fire burns
Explodes within me, and flows through my veins
Igniting terror and fear
For a moment you are there
Dark Angel
Vision . . .
Silver-blond hair and eyes blue as the morning sky
I am yours once again
Master . . .
LaCroix

by Denysé M. Bridger



It's rather odd and off the mark;
Different, to say the least.
It's claustrophobic and it's dark;
A true, exotic feast.

And though the mortals here may feel
It's such a trendy spot,
The danger's hidden, but it's real
"Average", it is not.

For some there hide from human sight,
It's best not to confront
These quiet, denizens of the night
Who watch, and wait and hunt.

If not for Janette's watchful eye,
Some there might think it fine,
And certainly would like to try
On some patrons, to dine.

But those who call this club their own
Respect her far too much
And know she never would condone
That sort of fatal touch.

And if the truth should all be told,
They fear Janette as well.
She's after all, so very old,
Though no mortal could tell.

For now, then, coexistence seems
The safest way to go.
Immortals have their nightly dreams;
And humans need not know.

by Kathleen Y. Bergeron



Did anybody ever ask
In squad room, hall, or jail,
Why it might be our favorite cop
Just isn't all that pale?

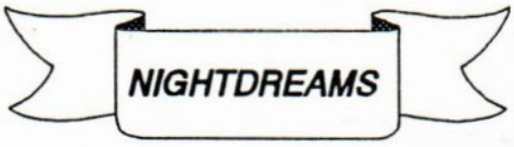
Because when you consider that
He "feeds" improperly,
He shouldn't look so healthy in
Most all the lights we see.

We seldom see our friend, LaCroix
With color in his face
And poor Janette looks like a corpse;
Not of the human race.

And yet our Nicholas somehow
Looks oh so very fine.
It seems like he's been walking out
In lots of bright sunshine.

Although we know that Nick is "dead"
I guess it must be true
His basic decency's alive
And that's what's showing through.

by Kathleen Y. Bergeron



Softly,
the wind's howling ceases.
The Hour of the Wolf runs by
and in its wake, the birds stir
tentatively at first,
then raucously,
uproariously,
Full-praising the light they cannot see
but believe in.

Slowly,
the endless depths of Space
grow opaque.
The very stars grow pale --
ladies in waiting
who demure at the approach
of their ruling sister.

Sadly,
I yearn toward
her procession of music
and gleams.
Poor sinner, I am lost
in the Hour of the Wolf.
O' Sceptered Orb,
do you know you have a lover
in the legions of the Night?

by Ellen "Blade" McMicking



To him, she was enchantment;
Personifying good.
He fell in love so hopelessly.
He did not think he should.

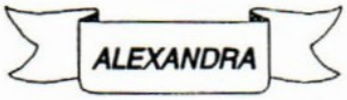
His adoration from afar
LaCroix could not endure.
And so he played a dreadful trick
To kill a love, so pure.

Believing she was like the rest,
By anger, led astray;
Nick killed this object of his love
And has since, rued the day.

But by his machinations, dark,
Instead of to his fold,
LaCroix drove Nick away for good
And lost his stranglehold.

And in the end, it was LaCroix
Who paid the highest cost;
For out of hatred, for all time,
This dark child, he has lost.

by Kathleen Y. Bergeron



She haunts me in an ugly way,
Her features twist with hate.
I want to say I'm sorry, but
Those words are far too late.

I have no way to ever make
It right for her again.
For what I did so long ago
Was part of my life's sin.

I used her for my pleasure, but
As soon as I was done,
I hated what my lust had caused
And wished I'd not begun.

But what LaCroix did after me
Was worse than death, so swift.
He realized she was not dead
And passed on his dark gift.

And so out there someplace, I know,
She's waiting for the chance
To pay me back for what I did
And take her own vengeance.

I watch my back most everyday
And hope that she will fade.
She's part of something evil;
A mistake that I once made.

Oh Alexandra I'd undo
My actions if I could.
But we both know the past is that
Which is each soul's deadwood.

And so I must be vigilant
And overcome my guilt.
I have to live today and make
The best of what I've built.

by Kathleen Y. Bergeron

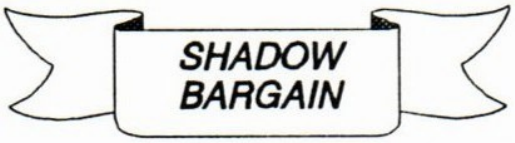


My lady of ravens,
How fair is your skin
And how dark your eyes
Which a man might drown in.
The curve of your smile
Is of cunning design
And if you desire it,
I will be your wine.

My lady of shadows,
You move with such grace.
The fall of your hair
Is like fine ebony lace.
I long for the answer
Of your kiss to mine
And if you but ask it,
I will be your wine.

My lady of secrets,
So silken your voice
And so keen your need
That I have but one choice:
To come to your hunger
And nothing decline.
Because you have wished it,
I will be your wine.

by Winifred McBeth



In bargaining with shadows
My life's blood I have sold.
The warming fire of heart's desire
For ashes, long gone cold.

I thought to purchase power;
I paid my soul in trade.
Caught in the net of late regret,
Fool's bargain I have made.

Humanity for hunger,
Sweet wine for bitter dregs
The gamble tossed and all is lost:
My finery for rags.

What price will buy my freedom?
What ransom for a soul?
What penance done bring absolution?
What balm will make me whole?

by Winifred McBeth

THE VISIT

by

Winifred McBeth

She came to see me last night. She came to visit an old man. For the last time? Perhaps.

She was afraid of me, I think. Afraid of **me**, in my frail old age! What harm could I do her? "Age cannot wither nor custom stale her infinite variety."

She may have been afraid that I would not remember her. As if I could forget! I may be old, but I am not dead -- not anymore. I will always remember her chill beauty and her sweet kiss. It may even be that an old man will stir in his grave to remember her touch. You must excuse me -- I have such odd notions, sometimes.

"I did not want to see you like this." Her voice was as silken as I remember.

"You see my heart's desire." I smiled at her but she did not smile back.

She stared at me. "Your hair is white."

"And my teeth are not my own," I teased her. There is a trick I used to play on the grandchildren, but it would have sent her away. I did not want her to go away.

"Your skin has wrinkled." She raised her hand but did not touch me.

"Yes. I have spent so much time in the sun." Even now, I cherish that word. "An old man must warm his bones somehow."

"Do you feel pain?" she asked.

"Sometimes." What old man does not? "But I do not give it."

"**This** is your heart's desire?" She was puzzled, as though she, in her eternal youthfulness, could forget.

"It is," I assured her. "I have my life again. I have four children and seven grandchildren. I was at their christening." I lowered my voice for this. It still startled her. "I watch them play in the park in the sunlight and we share ice cream."

"Your wife has died."

So long in her own world, she did not remember the polite phrase. No

matter. It has become an old, familiar sorrow. "Yes. I miss her. It was my joy to go to sleep in with her heart beating beside mine and to wake up warm in her arms."

I felt colder, somehow, remembering. "When she passed on, she said she would wait for me on the other side."

This made her look away. "How can you be sure of that?" Her voice was shaking. I had frightened her again.

"She will wait. She always kept her promises to me, even the impossible ones." I held out my hand with its wrinkled skin and dark spots. "Would I be here if she had not?"

"You would still be young and strong and immortal." There was quiet dismay in her voice.

"That would not be enough." She cannot be made to understand. "I needed a **reason** to live, as well."

"Your heart's desire." She repeated this to herself before she rose to leave. "Nichola," her hand, beautiful as snow, touched mine briefly, "rest in peace."

She came to see me last night. She came to visit an old man. She was afraid, I think, that I would not remember her. As if I could forget! I may be old, but I am not dead -- not anymore.

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